

Lessons from *The Serviceberry*: how ATS nourishes leaders to share their gifts

BY CHELSEA BROOKE YARBOROUGH

"All flourishing is mutual."

This is the foundation of Robin Wall Kimmerer's book The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World. The ATS staff recently read Kimmerer's book together. We did so to further imagine the ways our work creates room for reciprocity and abundance amid the vastness of our membership—and what we hope to create in support of them. Afterwards, we discussed themes touched upon in the book...themes of gratitude, abundance, shared resources, and service as a way of understanding how we, as colleagues, participate in practices that open possibility, even as we are so often gifted with the wisdom and generosity of the leaders we serve.

Kimmerer offers a powerful vision for what community—and, I would argue, leadership—can look like when we see ourselves as part of a collective. While there are many gifts in the text, and I encourage you to read it, three stand out to me as I think about the Association's commitment to leadership development and the hope of what will unfold in this upcoming program year.

1. The gratitude of experiencing a gift that comes with ease

In her reflections on nature's gifts, Kimmerer writes, "This abundance of berries feels like a pure gift from the land. I have not earned, paid for, nor labored for them...and yet here they are."

At last year's SPAN (Student Personnel Administrators' Network) conference, one leader said, "While I don't always agree with decisions of previous leaders, I realize that I am also living with the gifts of seeds they planted



that I now benefit from. I am always grateful that I came, connected with others, and glad my school told me about this opportunity."

This leader benefited from something they did not have to work for, and as much work as our leaders do, it is a gift to lean into gratitude for the ways we also live into someone else's work. When there is so much to carry, sometimes it is difficult to see the things we receive without strain, but perhaps the practice of gratitude gifts us with reminders that we are benefiting from someone else's effort—and, ideally, another leader will benefit from ours as well. May there be plentiful fruit for all our leaders.

2. The humility of receiving generosity and the wisdom of returning it with generosity

I am consistently amazed by how generosity shapes our leaders' interactions during ATS programs and in the moments between. This mutuality helps participants leave with new collaborators and practical strategies for the challenges they face. It also creates space for joys to be shared and celebrated, rather than allowing competition to foster scarcity. In rooms filled with peers who could easily withhold from one another, I am inspired by the ways that giving and receiving have become the norm—strengthening shared wisdom, deepening connection, and helping our membership move forward together.

3. *Circulating our wisdom creates abundance rather than detracting from it*

“Abundance is fueled by constantly circulating materials, not wasting them.”

In her conversation on reciprocity, Kimmerer says the earth shows us that sharing is the root of abundance. The serviceberry can thrive because of the soil, and birds can thrive because of the berry. Too many berries and not enough birds would result in overpopulation, ultimately harming sustainability of the berries. I am not naive enough to think that this mutuality means that all problems have been solved. I am confident, though, with evaluations to affirm it, that joining with colleagues who are navigating similar work and external realities can create the opportunity for something far closer to flourishing than not.

This is not an invitation to consume one another’s gifts, but rather to consider how sharing can amplify what is

learned. When someone shares a helpful case study, colleagues could learn more quickly from what that person had to move through. When a strategy emerges at one table to address a problem whispered at many, that moment at the microphone is often met with many nodding heads and whispers of “aha.” Over dinners, coffee breaks, and in-between times, the circulation of contacts, best practices, and resources gifts us with shared abundance; it never detracts.

The ATS Leadership Development Team is committed to creating opportunities for our leaders to gather and share abundance, with the hope that something they gain will allow them to return to their institutional ecosystems feeling more supported, resourced, and better than when they arrived.

We would love for you to join us this year and take part in this collective sharing! Your flourishing matters to us, just as our collective flourishing does, too.



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2026–27 Leadership Development Events

Mark your calendars and plan to join us!

- Technology in Theological Education Gathering
October 20–22, 2026 | Pittsburgh, PA
- Roundtable Seminar for Newly Appointed Faculty
October 28–30, 2026 | Nashville, TN
- Financial Officers’ Conference
November 10–12, 2026 | New Orleans, LA
- Executive Leadership Intensive
December 7–10, 2026 | New Orleans, LA
- Development and Institutional Advancement Program Conference
February 16–18, 2027 | New Orleans, LA
- Student Personnel Administrators’ Network Conference
March 9–11, 2027 | New Orleans, LA
- Vocational Retreat for Mid-Career Faculty
April 19–21, 2027 | New Orleans, LA
- Chief Academic Officers’ Society Conference
April 21–23, 2027 | New Orleans, LA