

Growing together: how Communities of Practice shape ATS leadership development

BY CHELSEA BROOKE YARBOROUGH

For nearly 50 years, ATS has sought to support leaders from its member schools through a growing variety of opportunities offered each year, ranging from annual conferences and regional gatherings to webinars, virtual discussion groups, and more. While many of these offerings have focused on leaders serving in a particular role—presidents, deans, finance officers, development and communications professionals, technology professionals, student personnel, and faculty—others have centered instead on exploring or developing competencies critical to senior leadership. Though forms and structures have naturally changed over time, one consistent commitment has held: to foster and build community among leaders in theological education.

One way ATS actively upholds this commitment is by fostering and engaging in Communities of Practice (CoP). Communities of Practice are learning spaces where individuals with a common interest, role, and/or position share their knowledge with one another. They are distinct from other groups by their intention to gather around a shared interest, with the goal of enhancing their practices moving forward.

In *Communities of Practice Within and Across Organizations*, the authors tell us that there are three crucial structural components within a CoP:

- **The domain or the purpose**—why is this group gathering,



and what questions and curiosities do they want to explore together?

- **The community**—who are the people coming together around this purpose?
- **The practice**—what activities can the community develop to learn together and to enhance the work they do individually and collectively?

CoPs help define leadership development

Communities of Practice are central to the leadership development programs offered by ATS for three primary reasons:

1. ATS CoPs are shaped and led by community members.

CoPs reflect the collaborative spirit that defines how ATS engages with its members—working together to create programs and services that truly serve them. This collaborative model works best when group members take an active role in shaping engagement and guiding the events designed for their community.

CoPs are most effective when group members have an

active role in facilitating and shaping engagement and the events created for that group. Each ATS CoP has either a steering committee or an advisory body that works with ATS staff to address the group's most pressing needs, interests, and issues, and then help shape relevant programming in response. We strive to make these groups representative of the kaleidoscope of identities across our schools so that we hear from a robust sample of our leaders each year. This ensures that the community shapes itself from experience rather than by an outsider making uninformed assumptions about the group's needs. The CoP creates exciting opportunities for staff and membership to work together and offers dynamic spaces for our leaders to gather.

2. ATS CoPs emphasize shared experience and horizontal learning.

ATS is committed to the notion that the wisdom needed is already in the room. Every group member not only has questions and curiosities we hope they explore, but we trust that they also bring wisdom and gifts that may be the very answer to someone else's question. Communities of Practice allow us to move away from a solely "sage on the stage" model and expand to include voices within the community as well. Invited speakers offer a starting point for the community to dialogue and deepen their own practices. We trust this wisdom sharing enhances the work of our leaders within their schools and strengthens their sense of themselves as leaders within the CoP as well.

3. ATS CoPs encourage collaborative, ongoing community engagement beyond the boundaries of specific conferences or events.

Collaborative engagement positions our programming toward community. Individuals leave with new information and strategies for their work. However, beyond that, participants leave knowing people they can call on when they have a question, concern, or celebration that arises outside of annual programming or between Zoom sessions. Participants leave with emails and phone numbers of colleagues with whom they can form real bonds. New members have been

known to leave with mentors, and over time, become the very mentors they once needed. We have witnessed individuals arrive in crisis and leave with colleagues who remind them they are not alone and who will work with them as they reach their goals. Over dinners, coffee breaks, Zoom chats, and hotel lobby conversations, relationships are formed across our schools, making our leadership stronger. When people come to a conference or a gathering, they are not only attending an event, but also joining and participating in an ongoing community.

A supportive environment for leaders

Growing in one's leadership is not about a single, ultimate arrival. It's about a series of arrivals to your next best, attending to the needs of your current context alongside the companioning contexts of the world and communities around you. As a leader, it's important not just to be skilled, but to be supported and resourced in your work. Hence, Communities of Practice are the root of our methodology for leadership development across constituencies, so that all leaders—whatever their job title or role—have a supportive and impactful environment in which to grow.

We hope all ATS member schools take the opportunity to engage in these Communities of Practice, because the more people at the table, the richer the experience. When shared interest, commitment to practice, and community meet, brilliant and powerful things happen that enhance the work of theological education in each of our schools individually and across the ATS membership at large.

If you have any questions or are interested in joining a Community of Practice, please reach out to [Deborah Shadd](#), director of leadership development, or [Chelsea Brooke Yarborough](#), associate director of leadership programming.

See the next page for a list of upcoming CoP events.



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Upcoming CoP events



- School for New Deans: Sept. 15-16, 2025
- Technology in Theological Education Group Gathering (TTEG): Oct. 15-16, 2025
- Finance Officers' Conference (CFO): Nov. 11-13, 2025
- Seminar for New Executive Officers: Dec. 8-9, 2025
- Executive Leadership Colloquium: Dec. 9-11, 2025
- Development and Institutional Advancement Program Conference (DIAP): Feb. 10-12, 2026
- Student Personnel Administrators' Network Conference (SPAN): March 10-12, 2026
- Chief Academic Officers Conference (CAOS): April 7-9, 2026
- New Faculty Gathering: April 22-24, 2026

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