

Leading through listening: shared stories, witness, and the gift of testimony

BY CHELSEA BROOKE YARBOROUGH

Testimony—sharing one’s joys and concerns in fellowship with others—is an important practice in many faith communities. Growing up in my church, testimony service was an opportunity for anyone who wanted to speak to have the microphone and share what God had done for them. Sometimes it was about something that seemed impossible yet still happened. More often, it was about how God showed up through the hands of someone who helped—a friend who called and had new wisdom, a neighbor who stepped in to help, or a nurse who was tender when they could have been harsh.

The importance of witnessing

In Communities of Practice, witnessing the joys and challenges of one’s collaborators and co-conspirators is a critical practice. Communities of Practice gather to sustain a reciprocal exchange of wisdom—both sharing and receiving it. In these communities, participants are gifted with expansive perspectives around a shared focus—a topic, a commitment, or a role—that allows the group to build together. As we continue to emphasize, Communities of Practice lie at the heart of the ATS Leadership Development portfolio.

This year in our annual programming, we prioritized testimony in several programs as a practice of highlighting shared experiences and witnessing different leadership roles. This emphasis grew from evaluations that highlighted a desire to hear lived, real-world examples from colleagues in the field. We’ve called it



different things—"Lessons I Have Learned," "Sharing Stories," and "Perspectives from the Community"—but they all centered on the same practice: listening to what has been possible and what has been challenging, and being present to reflect on where one’s own experiences resonate or diverge.

At this year’s Student Personnel Administrators’ Network (SPAN) Conference, we called it “Partners in Possibility,” and featured three powerful and different perspectives. One presenter, new to admissions, shared her experiences about the challenges of building internal partnerships that made her work possible. She highlighted the necessity of learning to enhance her communication skills and how the resulting connections have deeply enhanced her work.

Another presenter, one with more experience, described her journey from resisting partnerships to appreciating the gifts of collaboration across institutions—even amid the inconveniences. She is now the champion of what she once resisted.

Finally, a registrar with more than 25 years of experience reflected on how long-term, external partnerships had been a career-long gift and talked of lessons learned from some that stood out.

All three testimonies quickly became a collective witness.

A tapestry of understanding

For the last round of sharing, each table was invited to recount stories of what has been going well, what has been more challenging, and what they are learning. As each person shared, everyone was invited to be supportive with their presence and bearing witness to a colleague's story within this community of practice.

Several participants shared at the end of the conference how meaningful the storytelling had been—how this practice created a beautiful tapestry of understanding. It wasn't just one story, but the many overlapping experiences, perspectives, and insights that

invited people not only to witness the speakers, but also to bear witness to the resonance within their own work.

Testimony is a gift because people often feel less alone when they connect to someone else. Sharing is a powerful tool for building collaboration and creating connections across different people within the Community of Practice. Perhaps this practice of testimony found in many sacred gatherings can also be seen as a crucial leadership skill. It asks us to show up with our own story to share and to be present to witness the power and possibility of the stories of everyone else in the community.



Chelsea Brooke Yarborough is associate director of leadership programming at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.