

New academic leaders gather for this year's ATS School for New Deans



Twenty-nine newly appointed theological school academic leaders assembled at the ATS offices in Pittsburgh in September for two days of networking and discussions on academic leadership.

BY LAUREN JOHNSON

Deans play a vital, hands-on role in ensuring the effective functioning of theological institutions. As noted in the ATS Leadership Education Studies Project on Chief Academic Officers, “The expanding role of administration in school governance continues to impact the responsibilities of the dean in many schools. The increased role of administration in introducing, championing, and initiating change often requires the dean to be a ‘change agent’ and one who implements a change process in a culture that can at times be change resistant and require carefully delineated processes and consensus building.”¹

To adequately support leaders as they transition into this critical role, ATS began offering an annual event known as the School for New Deans in 2012. The school's 2025 session was held at the ATS office in Pittsburgh on September 15–16, co-hosted by the ATS Leadership Development and Accrediting teams.

Five goals to help leaders meet new challenges

The annual event has become a vital resource for equipping school leaders as they step into a challenging and multifaceted role. The stated goals of the School for New Deans include:

1. To provide new deans with important information as they step into their role and nurture the development of skills that can make their work more effective and fulfilling.
2. To acquaint new deans with resources available to theological schools through ATS and “kick off” their longer-term engagement with ATS.
3. To facilitate connections among academic deans serving within the distinctive world of theological education.
4. To continue the process of formation into the vocation of academic deanship.
5. To provide an opportunity for deans to step away from their offices for a time of learning, reflection, and refreshment.

Twenty-nine newly appointed leaders engaged in two days of networking and discussions that centered on academic leadership, including a key focus on relationships with both their faculties and CEOs. Attendees also heard veteran administrators give advice on topics such as educational assessment and financial realities that impact the work of the dean.

Participants explored the *Standards of Accreditation*, both together and in small groups with their ATS accrediting liaisons. Because all of the liaisons are former deans themselves, they were able to ground what they presented and shared in experience upon which they had lived and reflected.

Participants were able to further their discussions at a group dinner and an optional informational luncheon for deans from Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative grant recipient schools.

From dog paddling to prepared

One task posed to the group was to identify one word to summarize their experience as a new dean. The question was posed at the beginning of day one and at the end of day two. Responses greatly differed from beginning to end:

Day one responses included:

- Dog paddling
- Fire
- Survival
- Hectic
- Intense
- Un-formation

Day two responses included:

- Determined
- Synergy
- Enriched
- Enlightened
- Prepared

The new energy reflected in the perspective of the before vs. after responses demonstrates why coming together with peers and colleagues at events such as this is so valuable for theological school leaders.

When asked about the most valuable aspects of the School for New Deans, participants shared the following:

- "The session on vocation and relating to faculty and CEO were most relevant to me as dean of faculty. I appreciated the mobile discussions on accreditation standards. But truly, I most appreciated the time to connect with others in this work and the open spirit of sharing that you all cultivated. Thank you!"
- "The opportunity to meet my counterparts at other schools, and the ATS moderation of these encounters in particular, were very well done and useful. I especially benefited also from the clarity with which the specific standards were explained."

The 2025 School for New Deans proved to be a robust and generative learning opportunity for new academic leaders. There was space for learning, networking, collaboration, and community. The next opportunity for new academic deans to further engage with peers and veteran academic leaders is at the 2026 Chief Academic Officers Society (CAOS) Conference, which will be held April 7–9, 2026, in Charlotte, NC.



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¹The project was conducted by Deborah H.C. Gin (ATS); Randy MacFarland (retired, Denver Seminary); Jeney Park-Hearn (Portland Seminary of George Fox University); and David C. Wang (Fuller Seminary).