

# Reflecting on the work of the ATS Women in Leadership initiative

By MARY H. YOUNG

*March, being National Women's History Month, is an appropriate time for theological educators to pause and celebrate the contributions of women whose gifts, scholarship, talent, and skill are not only welcomed and deeply valued in our discipline, but critical for helping to shape the enterprise. The ATS membership needs to hear the stories about their vocational journeys, the leadership lessons they have learned, and the celebrations to be shared about their unique contributions at theological schools.*

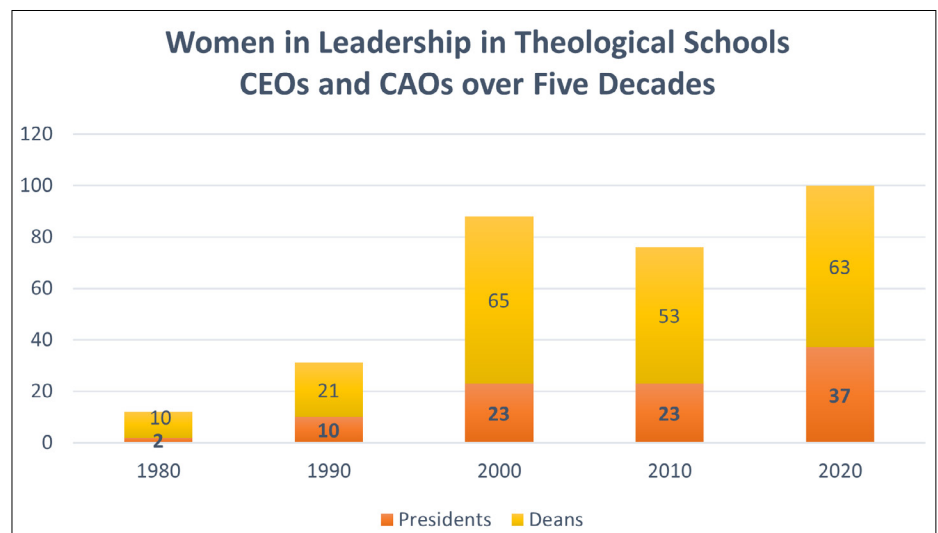


A group photo taken at the 2018 ATS Women in Leadership 20th Anniversary Celebration in Pittsburgh.

## **ATS and the Women in Leadership Initiative**

Women in Leadership (WIL) in theological education has been included in the programmatic efforts of ATS since 1997. The work of WIL has been generously funded over the years by grants from the Carpenter Foundation and Lilly Endowment Inc. In this targeted area of ATS work, the Association provides educational support for women faculty and administrators and assists schools in their efforts to include more women in leadership positions.

The Association's work has helped to move the needle for many women in ATS schools serving in senior leadership capacities as presidents and deans during the last five decades. The graph below shows data gathered through an ATS women in leadership timeline document. Note how the numbers of senior women leaders grew significantly from 1990, with twice the number of women presidents and three times the number of female deans by 2000. Every year since 1990, at least one woman has been named to one of the top two positions at an ATS member school, and there are scores of other women in varied positions whose leadership is critical for thriving institutions.



	CEO	CAO
Asian	1	7
Black	8	13
Hispanic		3
Native		1

The table to the left reveals a more granular look at specific data from the ATS member database regarding women of color in senior leadership.

While the number of women

CAOs (deans) is much larger than that of the CEOs (presidents), all the numbers suggest that more work can be done to build pipelines for women in senior leadership positions.

## What we are learning from ATS WIL programming

ATS programming for women has included a variety of leadership development opportunities during the last five years such as annual fall conferences, periodic pre-conferences for women presidents and deans, and occasional pre-conference sessions for midcareer women faculty. More recent programming included a mentoring program and newly developed fall and spring virtual summits.

*"I take home two ideas: (1) Peer relationships are absolutely essential for women who share common goals and aspirations and (2) ATS plays a unique role in fostering professional development and peer relationships among women in leadership."*

—2018 ATS Women Emerging in Leadership Development Institute participant

Observations from ATS staff and participants' comments on past WIL event evaluations have revealed that women of varied races and ethnicities, varied ecclesial families, varied geographical locations, and varied contextual realities have found sisterhood, mentorship, vocational guidance, and encouragement

in their work through the ATS Women in Leadership Initiative. Women benefit greatly from programming where they can hear others' stories and learn from their experiences. They appreciate having a space to share their own stories, as they have felt that there is little opportunity for these kinds of conversations to take place elsewhere.

There is a need for continued programming that

*"I think I would encourage more female leaders to prioritize getting to know the ATS network and, in particular, make use of the powerful data that's made available to tell our story (from the research)."*

—2021 WIL Virtual Leadership Summit participant

focuses on leadership skill development—generally for women across the vocational spectrum—as well as specifically for women serving in senior leadership roles. Mentoring and coaching are viable and important advocacy models for developing women into leadership. Through these engagements, women gain self-knowledge and vocational clarity.

At the spring 2020 virtual launch of the ATS WIL Mentoring Program, ATS staff members involved with the program left the event inspired by the magnitude of work the leaders (both

mentors and mentees) provide to ATS

member institutions, the selfless contributions they are making to theological education as a profession, the joy and passion they find in their work, and the sheer hope and optimism they

express for the enterprise. At the fall 2020 virtual WIL gathering, participants noted an increased awareness of how "isms" and "microaggressions" manifested themselves in the workplace and felt they had been provided with knowledge that equips them to better understand and navigate such dynamics.

A fall 2021 WIL Virtual Leadership Summit provided an opportunity to focus programming on specific leadership skills that emerged from the 2015 ATS WIL research study. They were skills for which women indicated they

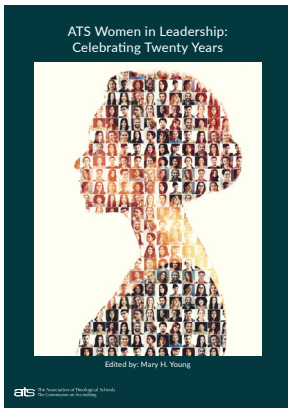
*"I am not alone! I have agency—agency to grow, agency to build my skillset, (and) agency to use my voice in service to the institution."*

—2019 Women Advancing in Leadership Development Institute participant

*"I have returned to work with a newfound sense of confidence as a leader to my staff and a peer among my colleagues. I have a renewed determination to make my voice heard in the decision-making process, and I feel I have been equipped with some new tools to prepare for and work through challenging leadership moments."*

—2019 ATS Women in Leadership Dean's Consultation participant

would like to build capacity—grant writing, networking/building social capital, change management, strategic planning, and decision making.



In spring 2018, ATS celebrated 20 years of WIL programming. The holiday 2020 issue of *Colloquy Online*, included an [article](#) that discussed a [publication](#) celebrating the voices and scholarship of women from across the membership. The publication included leadership reflection essays from eight women at ATS schools and a guest researcher for the 2015 WIL research project. In the publication, ATS staff members Deborah Gin and Jo Ann Deasy also share key findings that emerged from the research project examining the Association’s 20-year work with WIL. Through my own work at ATS since 2017, I noted in the publication that “Women in Leadership gatherings have not only been ‘holy blessings,’ but they have also inspired a ‘righteous indignation’ about the leadership challenges and inequities that women in theological education find themselves up against.”

ATS continues its great advocacy for women through programs of professional development and leadership capacity building. Women who serve ATS schools are encouraged to continue connecting with one another for peer learning and resource sharing on [Engage ATS](#).

### **Looking forward**

As I retire from ATS in June, my colleague Elsie Miranda, ATS director of accreditation and diversity, will take the baton and advance this initiative—listening and responding to the needs of women across the ATS membership. She looks forward to leading this work and partnering with women who are making a difference not only at their schools, but in the whole of theological education. You will be hearing more from her in the coming months.

We look forward to the next offering in our **Women in Leadership Webinar Series** to be held **Thursday, March 30, from 1 to 2:30 p.m. ET**. Please mark your calendars now for this event—more details will be forthcoming!



*Mary H. Young is Director of CORE and WIL Programs, after serving as Director of Leadership Education, at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

### **Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories**

The National Women’s History Alliance (NWHHA), which spearheaded the movement for March being declared National Women’s History Month, has announced *Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories* as its theme for 2023. The theme is designed to honor women from all communities who have devoted their lives and talents to producing art, pursuing truth, and reflecting the human condition decade after decade (see [full discussion](#) on the NWHHA’s website). Centered in Santa Rosa, California, the NWHHA encourages local communities throughout the country to use the year’s theme to guide their own celebrations.

Joining in celebration with the NWHHA’s theme, ATS invites any past participants of ATS Women in Leadership events to email the name and an image of a “shero” along with 20 to 40 words that describe an outstanding quality of that woman’s life to [Elsie Miranda](#) by March 8. Submissions will be featured in a PowerPoint presentation to be shared on the ATS website, Engage ATS, and the Association’s social media channels.