

Reflection, research, and response: re-energizing ATS work on race and ethnicity

BY MARY YOUNG

The tensions around race and ethnicity have significantly heightened in North America in recent years. With the rapid “browning” of the US population and the consequent focus in higher education on intercultural and cross-cultural training, theological education has also recognized and embraced the need to help institutions develop capacity in matters related to diversity and to prepare their students to serve in racially diverse contexts. Having reflected on past initiatives and evaluated their impact, the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) is now re-energizing efforts in this area. The result: programmatic initiatives to (1) develop resources in support of race and ethnicity, (2) build capacity by assisting 20 schools in cultivating their abilities to educate racial/ethnic students, and (3) coordinate support and convene partners to work on these issues.

Reflection: 17 years of programming

Building upon ATS engagement in diversity-focused initiatives as early as 1968, the Association launched the Committee on Race and Ethnicity in 2000 to focus on issues that prepared both individuals and institutions to do ministry in a society that was rapidly becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse. As the numbers of racial/ethnic persons in theological education increased,



CORE's work shifted from advocacy toward increasing numbers of minorities to nurturing and supporting those minority leaders in their work, a focus that would come to permeate the agendas of all ATS committees and conferences. Critical questions were raised about how best to encourage and retain underrepresented faculty and administrators in theological education, and Lilly Endowment Inc. generously funded seven years of work to support these leaders by examining their unique needs and issues.

The programming included racial-specific gatherings, the creation of a diversity folio, and special attention to the inclusion of underrepresented constituents on accrediting visiting teams, boards, and committees.

It soon became clear that while supporting these leaders was absolutely important, it was also necessary to build capacity in their schools in order to sustain the encouragement and affirmation they were receiving through ATS programming. That concern was augmented by a peer review suggesting the rapid changes in North American demographics anticipated by the year 2040. In response, the next seven years of CORE work focused on building institutional skill and capacity related to racial/

ethnic faculty and administrators as well as preparing students to minister in diverse contexts. A major aspect of the programming during this reflective shift included the intensive two-year *Preparing for 2040* project that involved 67 schools designing and implementing strategic diversity plans. During this time, ATS saw significant increases in enrollment of racial/ethnic students and employment of racial/ethnic faculty in member schools. Significant revisions were made to the 2010–2012 Standards of Accreditation that would promote diversity and increase access for underrepresented populations.

For more on past CORE programming, see articles in [Colloquy Online](#) and in the [Theological Education journal](#).

Research: assessing impact and determining new priorities

The reflective process led ATS to pause the work of CORE during 2014–2015 in order to conduct extensive research that would evaluate past work and provide guidance for future programming. Under the leadership of Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, a team of research consultants conducted an evaluation that included focus groups, surveys, and consultations involving past participants, committee members, current students, and graduates. In this issue of *Colloquy Online*, Gin's article, "[How well are we doing on race? A realistic assessment rooted in research,](#)" elaborates on the findings from the CORE research and indicates how those findings determined the current CORE programming initiatives. The full research report was published in the [Theological Education journal](#).

Response: providing resources and equipping institutions

The data from the research helped to shape priorities for a proposal to fund future programming and to guide the CORE advisory committee in its work. These initiatives are complemented by the Association's continuing support of African American, Latino/a, and Asian descent presidents and deans.

Priority #1

ATS will develop resources for schools to use as they encounter different institutional tasks related to race, ethnicity, and diversity. The first of these resources will help schools determine "success" in institutional and educational efforts related to race and ethnicity. The second will be a collection of existing and new scholarly articles on issues of diversity in theological education. The third will be a set of "best practices" documents related to various diversity issues, such as identifying, employing, and retaining racial/ethnic faculty and administrators; strategic diversity planning and implementation; institutional support and effective educational strategies for racial/ethnic students; and developing patterns of institutional connection with racial/ethnic communities in the school's own neighborhood.

- **Status:**

In concert with ATS staff, the CORE Committee is working to identify ten theological leaders, five each to serve on a "student success" committee and an "editorial committee." These committee members, representing the gender, racial, and ecclesial family diversity in our ATS membership, will assist in harnessing varied resources to benefit both institutions and the students they serve.

Priority #2

ATS will work with a group of member schools to assess educational effectiveness with racial/ethnic students.

Teams of faculty and students from participating schools will work with coaches and consultants over two years to identify educational issues of importance for each participating school and to develop strategies that address those issues. This project will include a *launching conference* of representatives from the 20 schools to propel them into their work and, after two years, they will reconvene for a concluding *evaluative conference* in which they will report on the particular successes and the strategy their team has employed.

- *Status:*

The launching conference for 20 member schools committed to building their capacities to educate students for ministry in multiracial contexts will be held in Pittsburgh, October 24–26, 2018. Executive leaders and student representatives from the schools will gather to hear from renowned theological leaders doing critical work in race and gender studies, share best practices, engage in cross-cultural dialogue, and begin their thinking about tangible strategies to be implemented at their institutions. The final list of participating schools embodies the demographics below:

	Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic	Anabaptist	Totals
Related/Embedded	5	4	1		10
Independent	2	6		2	10

[The current group includes two Canadian and 18 US schools, two historically black theological schools, and one Asian-serving school. Among the participating schools are 15 predominantly white institutions and several schools that serve significant Latinx student populations.]

Priority #3

ATS will strengthen collaborative relationships with *Asociacion para la Educacion Teological Hispana (AETH)*, the *Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE)*, the *Hispanic Summer Program (HSP)*, the *Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI)*, *The In Trust Center for Theological Schools*, *Leadership Education at Duke Divinity*, *The Louisville Institute*, *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*, and other entities to

coordinate efforts to support and engage racial/ethnic seminary students, PhD students, faculty, administrative staff, and institutions committed to serving racial/ethnic constituencies.

- *Status:*

Representatives from the agencies will meet September 20, 2018—the first of three annual meetings—to discuss issues of common concern and plan coordination strategies to increase corporate impact. Participating agencies will come having reflected on the following questions:

- What are the challenges and success stories?
- Are there other voices that should be conversation partners with this group but are currently not included at the table?
- What types of services do we have in common? How might we have greater impact through shared resources?
- Where are the gaps in the services we provide for racial/ethnic constituencies?

ATS is committed to diversity as one of its four core values and, through these varied programs, seeks to broaden current work and re-energize efforts toward preparing member schools and the students they serve for ministry in multicultural and multiracial contexts. *For such a time as this*, CORE's role in leading the association to champion this work is both necessary and celebrated.



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