

# School for New Deans returns to ATS office in Pittsburgh

BY LISA KERN

*The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) staff welcomed 28 participants from a wide range of member schools to Pittsburgh on February 26 and 27, for its popular School for New Deans event—the first time this annual gathering has returned to the ATS office in five years.*



The 2024 ATS School for New Deans participants pose for a group picture at the ATS office in Pittsburgh.

Stephen Graham, strategic director of context and continuity; director of accreditation at ATS and a former dean himself, launched the first School for New Deans gathering at the ATS office in December 2013, to provide “an important boost” to those in the early stage of that vocation. Receiving such a strong interest, that first gathering was split into two separate cohorts spread across three full days to accommodate the large number of new academic deans wanting

to attend. Many past participants have commented on how they advanced their understanding of the work, of ATS, and the value of the role from attending.



Stephen Graham welcomes attendees to the recent gathering.

The goals of the event included:

- providing new deans with important information and nurturing development of the skills that will make their work more effective and fulfilling,
- acquainting new deans with the resources available to theological schools through ATS,
- facilitating connections between academic deans serving within the distinctive world of theological education,
- continuing the process of formation into the vocation of the academic deanship, and
- providing an opportunity for academic deans to step away from their offices for a time of learning, reflection, and refreshment.



Barbara Mutch (second from right) leads a small group discussion about the standard on Student Formation.

In those first few years, attendees learned more about the vocation of the academic dean, the academic dean and finance, the academic dean's roles in accreditation, the assessment of student learning, educational technology, and faculty development. As the world of theological education changes and as the academic dean's role continues to evolve, the event's current agenda still included most of those topics with the addition of discussions regarding the crucial relationship between the academic dean and the CEO, international programming, and trends in the schools and in the Association.

Graham said attendees regularly spoke about the value of having met the ATS staff and especially how their minds had been changed to a much more positive view of accrediting. The recent agenda included time for breakout groups led by accreditation directors to discuss specific ATS *Standards of Accreditation*—Diversity, Educational Evaluation, Student Formation, Shared Governance, and Human Resources. There was also a designated time during the event for participants to meet with the specific ATS accrediting staff liaisons assigned to their schools.

"The design included having the event at the ATS office in Pittsburgh so participants would have the opportunity to see where we work, but especially so they would have the opportunity to interact with some of the ATS staff," said Graham. "At the office, we're able to include occasional opportunities to meet with accrediting liaisons, those with whom the deans would interact related to the annual report forms and other ATS business, share

information about ATS resources by those who provided the resources, and those involved with other leadership education events. I have always enjoyed this event because it allows members of the ATS staff to present their work in ways that would be of value for those new to academic administration," he added.

"I appreciated the presentations, which covered a wide variety of topics, and the chance to ask questions and meet ATS staff," said one participant.

A highlight of the gathering throughout the years has been the opportunity for members of the ATS staff who have served as academic deans to share their stories about why they accepted the role, its joys and sorrows, and the ways they sustained themselves in the work during that time.

Barbara Mutch, ATS senior director of accreditation, led the session on "the vocation of academic leadership," and shared some of her story with the recent attendees. She referenced a work of art, created for a liturgical calendar, that hangs in her office. It depicts an African Christ, hands cupped, ready and waiting to receive. She reflected on her daily practice when she served as dean of arriving early to sit and "pray a little before the community arrived."



Artist: Janet McKenzie

"As the fall unfolded with its mounting pressures and predicaments, my calendar Jesus and I were praying quietly together one morning, and I realized what I had somehow never seen before—that I could take all that I had been accustomed to placing in my hands and holding before God and put them in those hands instead," said Mutch.

Staff members from the In Trust Center for Theological Schools were also invited to speak to the new deans at

the February gathering. Amy Kardash, president, and Ann Marie Glanden, vice president for programs, described the various resources the In Trust Center provides and introduced its new project on governance that recently launched.

"It was really helpful to get oriented to the work of the academic dean from various perspectives. It was also very helpful to hear how other schools do things and to know that we're not the only ones who struggle with certain issues," said another participant.

"The recent group of attendees asked great questions and had good insight into a number of important issues,"

said Graham. "Having such people moving into academic leadership roles gives us all confidence in the future of leadership in the schools."

With 25 to 30 new chief academic officers attending the School for New Deans each year, ATS has hosted roughly 300 participants from nearly 200 different member schools since the event began. It has proven to be a vital resource for equipping school leaders as they step into a challenging and multifaceted role.



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