

SPAN focuses on mental health and inclusion for first virtual conference

BY LILLIAN H. LAMMERS

Following a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic, the ATS Student Personnel Administrators Network (SPAN) Conference was held on March 30 and 31, 2022. For the first time, the conference was offered in an exclusively virtual format to accommodate ongoing health and safety concerns.



The theme was *Re-envisioning Theological Education: Balancing Agility and Stability amidst Rapid Change*, which captured where many theological institutions found themselves in the 2021–22 academic year. More than 230 ATS professionals registered for the conference, marking a significant increase from previous, in-person SPAN conferences.

“I really appreciated that the conference was online,” said one participant. “My team was able to divide and conquer, as we each attended different workshops and plan to review notes together.”

Early in the academic year, the leadership of the SPAN Steering Committee determined two emerging topics as important areas for professional development—mental health and diversity and equity and inclusion. As a result, the recent SPAN conference featured two plenary sessions that touched on both subject areas.

On the first day of the conference, Carol Henderson, vice provost for diversity and inclusion, chief diversity officer, and adviser to the president at Emory University, delivered a presentation titled “Prologue to a Greater Purpose: JEDI Activated in Service to Humanity.”

In her talk, she gave attendees a helpful framework for thinking about justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (JEDI) work within their own institutional contexts.

The second day of the conference featured a plenary session by Danjuma Gibson, professor of pastoral care at Calvin Theological Seminary, called “Psychospiritual Health on the Front Lines of Theological Education.” Gibson offered attendees the opportunity to take a personal inventory of their own mental and spiritual well-being, and he encouraged SPAN professionals to think of their well-being as integral to their own success as well as to the student populations they serve.

“I really appreciated Dr. Gibson’s plenary. It was exactly what I needed to hear related to my work as an ATS student services professional,” said an attendee.

Following both plenary sessions, participants met in small groups to discuss learning outcomes. The conference also featured 12 breakout workshops that included topics of interest to institutional roles such as admissions,

student life, financial aid, and others relevant to anyone working in theological education.

The SPAN Steering Committee hopes to plan an in-person conference again in 2023.

“I think, at this point, I’m all Zoomed out and that really affects my ability to stay focused and learn,” one participant shared. “I’m hoping to be able to attend this one day

in person so that I can have the opportunities to really get to know my peers and make real connections.”

ATS members can learn more about SPAN on [the ATS website](#) and connect with colleagues in the SPAN community on [Engage ATS](#), where related upcoming events will be posted.



Lillian H. Lammers is currently serving as a consultant for the ATS Student Personnel Administrators Network.