The priorities you named

By Deborah H. C. Gin

Earlier this year, the Association collected your responses on the ATS Strategic Priorities Survey, as part of a strategic prioritization process the ATS Board of Directors initiated last year. The aim of the survey was to identify high-level priorities, and examples of tactics within each priority, that the membership deemed important.

Overall results

Survey invitations were sent to members of both the ATS Board of Directors and the Board of Commissioners, all presidents and deans, and a random sample of faculty and non-cabinet administrators of ATS member schools. The nearly 560 respondents were from 231 (or 83%) of all ATS schools. The survey invited respondents to prioritize the following six high-level areas of the Association's work:

- Adoption of **accrediting standards** that promote quality and flexibility

- **Advocacy** on behalf of theological education and the schools

- Attention to issues of **diversity**

- Exploring educational, financial, or organizational **models**

- Fostering improvement in schools through **programs and services**

- Providing thought leadership, **research, and data** on theological education

As expected, accrediting standards made first rank, no matter how the data were sliced. This was followed by programs and services, research and data, models, diversity, and advocacy, in that order.

(See below for results sliced by different school types or individual demographics or roles.)

Respondents were also asked to provide open-ended input—coded by two independent coders—about aspects in each area to which the Association should pay particular attention. Below are the top two themes that emerged in each category:

1. Programs and services
   a. Expand modes of delivery of its programs and services
   b. Provide resourcing of various types

2. Research and data
   a. Share analysis on trends and projections
   b. Conduct research on the relevance and the future of theological education

3. Models
   a. Explore financial models
   b. Further explore educational models

4. Diversity
   a. Continue to focus on race/ethnicity
   b. Address systemic issues related to diversity

5. Advocacy
   a. Support the schools in the arenas of the US Department of Education (USDE) and governmental/provincial agencies
   b. Champion graduate theological education in the public sphere

The survey did not solicit open-ended input for the accrediting standards, as the redevelopment process has included its own multi-pronged plan for gathering membership input. The survey, however, did find that certain themes cut across all high-level areas including finances, enrollment, collaboration, and the relevance of theological education.

Further explanation

As with any research, it is important to understand how context might bear upon the results and how nuances emerge when results are sliced by various factors.

For example, interesting differences appear in the ranking of high-level priorities when responses of this survey are compared with those of a survey to the membership three years ago, during the search for the next ATS executive director. Where accrediting standards emerged as the top priority by all in this survey, research and data (and thought leadership) ranked first in the earlier survey. This makes sense, given the pressing needs of the membership at the respective times: the need for analysis and thought leadership during a leadership transition, and the need for the adoption of revised standards that promote quality and flexibility during a major redevelopment of the accrediting standards.

Another interesting set of differences surfaces when the rankings are sliced (data are disaggregated) by various factors. For example, note the different rank of Advocacy in Figure 1. While priorities 1 to 4 are the same for both types of schools, Advocacy ranks higher for Canadian

schools than for US schools. The survey does not ask why, but it is not difficult to imagine that Canadian schools would welcome advocacy in the realm of the USDE.

	US Schools	Canadian Schools
1	Standards	Standards
2	Programs & Services	Programs & Services
3	Research & Data	Research & Data
4	Models	Models
5	Diversity	Advocacy
6	Advocacy	Diversity

Figure 1: Rank of Strategic Priorities by Country of School

Advocacy also ranks differently when the data are sliced by the school's relatedness to another entity (e.g., university). Figure 2 shows the relative ranking of Advocacy. Respondents from related schools ranked Advocacy higher than those from stand-alone schools, perhaps, because related schools experience a greater need for advocacy on issues that arise from the affiliated university, for example.

	Stand-Alone Schools	Related Schools
1	Standards	Standards
2	Programs & Services	Research & Data
3	Research & Data	Programs & Services
4	Models	Models
5	Diversity	Advocacy
6	Advocacy	Diversity

Figure 2: Rank of Strategic Priorities by Relatedness of School

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Exploration of educational, financial, and organizational models ranks differently by role at the school. In Figure 3, presidents rank Models third, just below Programs & Services; deans rank it fourth, just below Research & Data; and faculty rank it last, while ranking Research & Data second. In some ways, this makes sense, given the attention that chief administrators must direct to structural and institutional issues as *part of their roles*. Faculty, in their role, are expected to attend more to foundational or discipline-specific issues. This finding, however, does suggest areas that both schools and the Association can address to ensure that multiple stakeholders are engaged in a variety of key conversations of the school.

Comparisons by gender reveal interesting differences as well—note Figure 4, where attention to issues of Diversity ranks for men and for women. It is last for men and fourth for women, above Models and Advocacy. For racial/ethnic respondents, Diversity ranks second. While these differences may be as expected, the comparisons do highlight varying sets of priorities and raise questions about how the Association might attend to the strategic priorities of *all* its member schools and their constituents. Which set of strategic areas should be prioritized at this time and why?

	Presidents	Deans	Faculty
1	Standards	Standards	Standards
2	Programs & Services	Programs & Services	Research & Data
3	Models	Research & Data	Programs & Services
4	Research & Data	Models	Diversity
5	Diversity	Advocacy	Advocacy
6	Advocacy	Diversity	Models

Figure 3: Rank of Strategic Priorities by Role

	Men	Women	R/E Respondents
1	Standards	Standards	Standards
2	Programs & Services	Research & Data	Diversity
3	Research & Data	Programs & Services	Programs & Services
4	Models	Diversity	Models
5	Advocacy	Models	Research & Data
6	Diversity	Advocacy	Advocacy

Figure 4: Rank of Strategic Priorities by Demographics

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More details

Analysis of the open-ended response for each of the high-level areas yielded noteworthy findings as reported below.

Within the high-level area of Programs & Services, 23 themes emerged. Modes of delivery were most frequently mentioned (25%), then resourcing (22%), topic-based curricula, community interaction, leadership development, and others. Figure 5 shows the top modes of delivery. As you will note, these suggest a desire by the membership to engage in expanded ways, beyond large, in-person conferences—online, in cohorts, and regionally, for example. Responses such as "smaller snippets, so as not to overburden with cost and time away" or "sustained/selective groups" were common and illustrate this desire. While such input may appear at first only tactical, a closer read of the data hints at a cultural shift in how the membership might engage into the future.
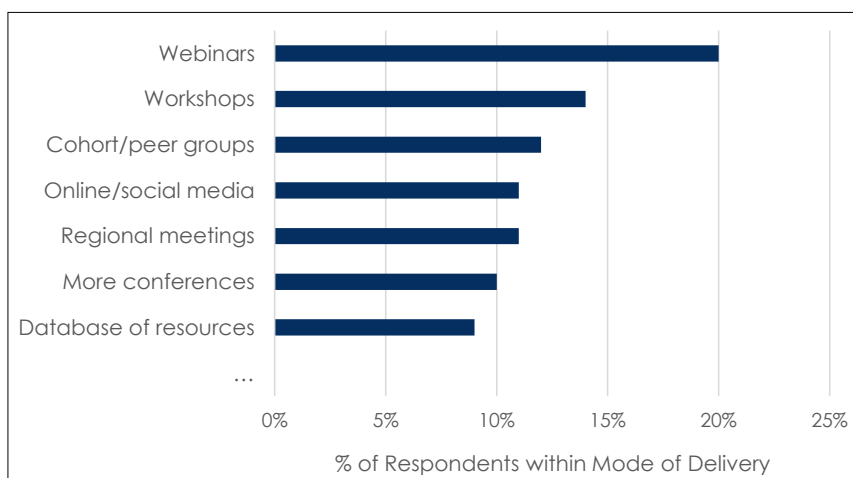

Figure 5: Top Modes of Delivery Suggested

A variety of categories emerged with respect to the strategic area of Research & Data, none far outnumbering others. The most frequent categories were: trends, projection, and other data analysis (15%) and research on the relevance and future of theological education (e.g., "making the case for graduate education to supporters," helping "churches and the broader culture understand the role and value of theological education in North America," and "what purpose do we fulfill [with] future generations?") (11%).

Given that finances is the number one topic that schools feel is particularly pressing for their current realities, it is no surprise that exploration of financial models rose to the top of the Models list, by far (35%), and at the top no matter how the data were sliced (e.g., by type of school, role at the school, and others). Some examples that were coded under this theme included: institutional costs (by school type, region, etc.), salaries/pay structure; student cost versus employment earnings (i.e., graduates' ROI); student debt; and models for financial viability. The next highest Models theme was educational models (25%) and it included topics such as hybrid delivery, online delivery that is specifically relevant to theological education, and other modes of delivery; competency-based education; and models to offer education for non-degree seeking students.

A number of themes emerged within the high-level priority of Diversity. Figure 6 displays them all. While there are a number of sub-themes within Diversity, the sub-theme of race/ethnicity was mentioned most frequently (32%) and at the top for schools, regardless of ecclesial family (evangelical and mainline Protestant, as well as Roman Catholic/Orthodox).[1] Systemic Issues was a distant second (13%); these included topics related to centralizing the value institutionally, such as representation, access and affordability, support, curriculum, and others. It is also important to note that a small percentage of respondents named cautions regarding this strategic priority, including the view that ATS should not be involved (4%—e.g., "not the role of ATS" or "served by other programs/entities") and that there should be an awareness

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1   The ten schools voted into the membership at the last ATS Biennial Meeting were not yet part of the database at the time the sample was pulled and were, thus, not part of the survey invitation.

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of conservative views (3%—e.g., "...that evangelical schools must hold to, given [their] constituencies"). Interestingly, this last sub-theme was indicated by the same number of respondents from evangelical as mainline schools.
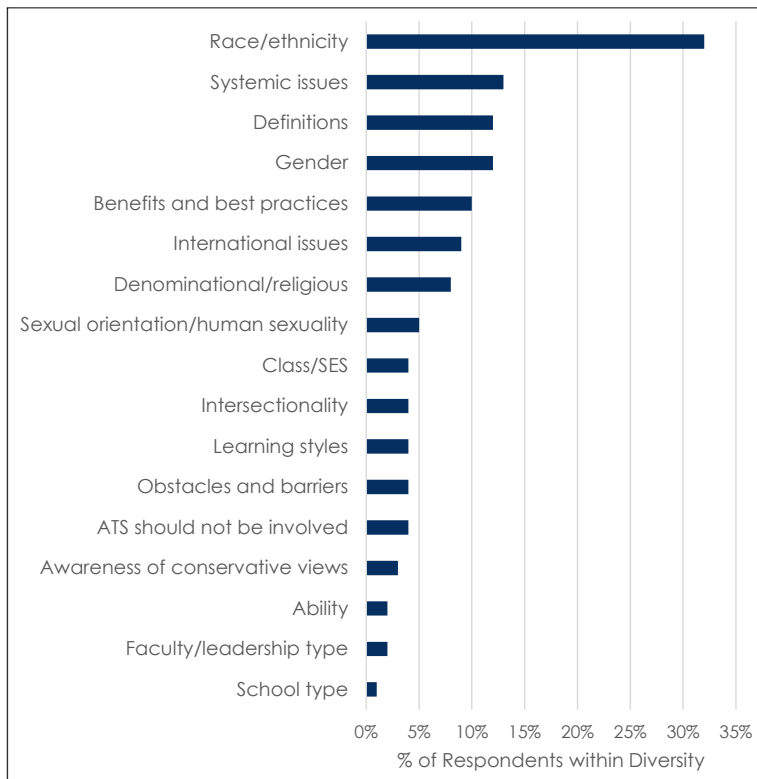

Figure 6: Sub-themes Suggested in Diversity

In terms of Advocacy on behalf of graduate theological education and the schools, the most frequent ways suggested by the membership were bringing awareness about issues for theological education, working with regional accreditors, and keeping schools informed of larger-landscape issues. Such advocacy is seen to be needed by most in the arenas of the USDE and other governmental or provincial entities (30%), with the public

(17%—e.g., media and general society), with affiliated universities (16%), with churches/denominations (13%), and with other accrediting agencies (9%), among others.

Concluding thoughts

Your responses on the ATS Strategic Priorities Survey yielded a sense that the Association, in many aspects, is already prioritizing the right areas—e.g., educational models, standards that lift up quality but are flexible for various contexts and missions (with the work of the redevelopment process), webinars, and in-person meetings. At the same time, your responses signal that the Association may need to consider more focused attention in other directions, including:

- exploration of financial models,

- enhanced engagement across the membership, including cohort- or topic-based connections and resourcing,

- adjusted understanding of "diversity" work, so as not to minimize the priority of race/ethnicity among many "diversities," and

- research on the relevance of theological education and its value for students, the church, higher education, and supporters.

Graduate theological education, the Association, the schools, and their constituencies are now in an era of rapid change, and ATS must find ways to strategically stay ahead of such change. The perspectives you submitted will play a key role in helping the ATS Board of Directors determine strategic priorities for the Association's future.

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