

# Virtual recruiting: high-touch work in a high-tech world

By JO ANN DEASY

*In April 2020, ATS conducted a survey of CEOs and CAOs at member schools to learn about their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about the intermediate challenges they were most concerned about, the top concern was how to enroll new students beyond this spring. ATS has been equipping theological schools to respond to these challenges through a series of webinars, including a recent webinar on virtual recruiting. The webinar highlighted how theological schools are maintaining their focus on high-touch recruiting while shifting to a high-tech environment. It also highlighted the difficulty of inviting prospective students into an unknown future.*

More than 110 people attended the webinar led by three panelists: Adam Groza, vice president of enrollment and student services and associate professor of philosophy of religion at Gateway Seminary; Claretta McDaniel, assistant dean for student affairs at Howard University School of Divinity; and Rayce Lamb, director of ministry and vocational exploration at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. The panelists responded to three questions: (1) How has recruiting changed in response to COVID-19? (2) What has been effective? (3) How do you keep connected during the summer?

## **What has changed?**

The most obvious change named by the panelists was a shift from in-person recruiting to virtual event planning. Most recruiting personnel spend much of the spring



traveling to various recruiting events connected with undergraduate institutions, career fairs, and denominational gatherings. When they are not on the road, admissions personnel are hosting the all-important campus visit.

Travel restrictions and the cancellation of large gatherings meant that recruiting personnel had to shift their methods of reaching out to prospective students. Along with the creation of virtual events, recruiting personnel began following up with any and all contacts they had on their prospective applicant lists. This included contacts from previous events and those who had recently started but not completed applications in recent years.

One surprising benefit of the current stay-at-home orders has been the availability of prospective students for conversations about a possible future in theological education. This has been especially true for undergraduate students, many of whom have time for and interest in conversations about their future vocations.

While vocational discernment has always been a part of recruiting for theological education, it has become

even more critical in these uncertain times. And it is just one of the ways the message of recruiting is changing in response to COVID-19. Recruiters are inviting prospective students into an unknown future. As a result, they are spending a lot of time communicating that their schools are still open, classes will be held in the fall, and students can start online before thinking about moving to campus. McDaniel emphasized the importance of communicating both the knowns and unknowns. She spoke of a need for clarity, transparency, and responsiveness. Lamb shared that Wake Forest University School of Divinity has 22 contingency plans for the fall—a lot of unknowns, but it made a commitment that students will be able to take all of their courses online in the fall. Recruiters need to be a non-anxious, reliable presence as prospective students consider an uncertain future. Some recruiters, especially those with a primarily residential campus, have even shifted their marketing to a regional audience, anticipating limited travel in the fall.

### ***What has been effective?***

At a very practical level, many schools have been extending early application deadlines and/or waiving application fees. At least one school has shifted from mail-in to all online applications. Lamb shared how these decisions eased stress for both applicants and admissions personnel who were trying to meet administrative deadlines just as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. When application fees were waived, many reached out to those who had incomplete applications in the works. Other schools have pushed up their financial aid awards, sending out letters much earlier to help students make financial plans in the midst of a financially uncertain time.

Depending on the level of technical resources at an institution, recruiters have either been building on existing programs and platforms or learning and adapting quickly to the new virtual environment. They have been drawing on their IT and communications departments to offer

webinars, create virtual campus tours, strengthen websites, and increase social media presence. They are using Zoom, Facebook Live, Adobe Spark, Calendly, Webex, Slate Share, Softphone, and other programs to work remotely.

Virtual resources and events range from 20 to 30-second messages of encouragement and support posted on social media by key leaders, to longer virtual campus visits that included conversations with faculty, staff, and students, as well as participation in online courses. Wake Forest University School of Divinity even began offer-

ing its worship services online. Many recruiters are doing monthly events that include open office hours, information sessions, vocational discernment conversations, and other relevant content such as

*40% of respondents to the 2018–2019 ATS Entering Student Questionnaire visited their schools before attending. 80% of those who visited said it was important or very important in their decisions to attend the schools.*

“Why seminary Now?” and “How to Finance Theological Education.” When events are live, recruiters have multiple staff in the background responding to chats and answering questions. All events are recorded and repurposed in various ways. Longer videos are bookmarked for easy access to relevant content or broken down into shorter videos to be posted on websites and social media.

Recruitment has always been the responsibility of the entire seminary community. The most effective strategies for virtual recruiting continue to draw on key personnel. CEOs, deans, and key faculty and staff members are recording messages of welcome to newly admitted students, participating in open houses, and leading webinars. Recruiters are reaching out to key influencers, including board members, alums, and denominational leaders. When you cannot get to recruiting events, these key influencers become a primary way of making new contacts and reaching out to new prospective students.

Groza from Gateway Seminary emphasized the importance of consistent messaging during this time. In schools with multiple admissions staff, it’s easy to feel disconnected from one another and from the school’s mission

with everyone working from home. Groza meets daily with his admissions staff to keep them focused on the school's mission and strategic plan.

### ***Preventing summer melt***

The summer has always been a crucial time in the admissions process. Prospective students have been admitted into a program, but they have yet to matriculate. Plans can change during the summer. Prospective students can change their minds. As one of the panelists put it, a recruiter's responsibility does not end until a prospective student has made it through the fall deadline to drop a course.

Recruiters are finding it more important than ever to remain engaged with prospective students during the summer months. Groza described this engagement in three ways: stoking, persuading, and bonding. Schools are stoking the excitement of newly admitted students by sending them t-shirts, mugs, and other school gear. They are also sending welcome messages from various members of the community. They are continuing to

persuade prospective and admitted students by holding weekly check-ins and offering early orientation sessions. They are bonding with newly admitted students and building cohorts during the summer months that will carry these students into the fall semester. The goal, according to one of the attendees, is to "keep people engaged and address their concerns." These include financial concerns, relocation concerns, the ability to complete courses online, and vocational discernment.

No one knows what admissions will look like for the fall. Schools are reporting a decline in applicants for some programs, but increases in others. And it is still unclear what the fall semester will hold. In the midst of this uncertainty, recruiters are rising to the occasion. They are adapting their methods, changing their messaging, reaching out to prospective students, and preparing new cohorts to enter our theological schools in the fall. They continue to maintain their commitments to high-touch recruiting in this new high-tech world.



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