

“Educational Models and Practices: What We’ve Learned and Why It Matters”
Stephen R. Graham, The Association of Theological Schools
ATS Biennial Meeting, Denver, Colorado, June 20, 2018

Slide 1:

In 1918, ATS was formed, partly in response to a series of studies that suggested that theological education needed to change in order to serve the needs of churches and changing patterns of ministry. The studies concluded that:

- churches had grown to new levels of capacity and complexity,
- pastors and other religious leaders were being educated in ways that did not fit the changed reality of the churches and changing patterns of ministry,
- the “modern” era had brought significant changes to higher education, and
- new models of education were needed to fulfill the schools’ missions.

Those conclusions from the 1920s and 1930s sound strangely similar to conclusions and concerns we hear today.

In addition, we have experienced dramatic changes in:

- the students served by North American theological schools,
- the schools and their educational practices,
- the character of religious adherence and practice in North America, and around the globe, and
- the confidence—or lack of confidence—students have in the educational system.

Beth McMurtrie, “The Future of Learning: How Colleges Can Transform the Educational Experience,” 2018, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. “A prevailing narrative is that higher education in the United States, from community colleges to the Ivy League, is failing its students.” p. 8.

“The future of learning is not ‘Trust us.’ The future of learning is ‘Did it work?’” p. 9.

These realities affect theological schools as well.

In the midst of all the changes, one thing that has remained constant: the need for highest quality preparation for religious leadership—and the vital role played by ATS schools in that preparation. The ATS mission is:

To promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.

The Educational Models and Practices project has sought to support this mission and the work and mission of every school in the Association by facilitating study of the wide range of creative responses schools are using to address the challenges and embrace the opportunities in the present situation and the likely futures.

Remarkable work *is* being done by extraordinary people. That work is not completed—in fact, the future appears to require that it be ongoing and adaptation is perhaps the new norm. But the work *is* well underway, by people of great energy and purpose, and it carries great promise for the future.

In this presentation I'll very briefly describe the project, share just a few of the things we have learned, and offer some reflections on the implications of that learning.

Slide 2:

At one of the first meetings of the project, a large forum gathering those in peer groups studying particular educational models and practices, a plenary speaker noted the remarkable fact that the accrediting agency was actually *encouraging* innovation among its member schools. Participants spoke of this encouragement as a breath of fresh air, an energizing affirmation of the hard work they were doing.

The project has also brought a stronger sense of the value of working together—across the schools of the Association. At the final meeting of the peer groups a member of the project's advisory committee noted how often participants had come to speak about ATS as “us” rather than “them.”

Those are signals of first, a new reality, that innovation and accreditation are indeed compatible, and a realization and deeper understanding of something that has always been the case, that the Association of Theological Schools is “you.” There are a few of us who work in Pittsburgh, both in accrediting and in programs and services, but the Association is the member schools and the people that serve in them.

The Educational Models and Practices project has provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Association to discuss broadly a range of fundamental issues, and also to provide a boost to the schools to assist a lot of creative and substantive work already underway.

Slide 3:

The project has included five main areas of work.

Slide 4:

The project began with a survey of academic deans with 225 schools responding, an 83% response rate. Next was a follow up survey of 400 program directors from 200 different schools.

On the basis of information from those surveys, we formed 18 peer groups of schools to study particular educational models and practices. We ended up including 110 schools and over 260 participants from those schools.

Final reports from the 18 peer groups are available on the ATS website, along with summary reflections by Tom Tanner and myself.

Slide 5:

We knew that good work was underway and additional work was being imagined. To support this work the program awarded two types of grants totaling \$3.4 million:

1. 58 “innovation grants” of up to \$50,000 to help schools develop and expand innovative educational models,
2. and 44 faculty development grants of up to \$15,000 were awarded to assist schools to help their faculty members re-tool to engage new educational models and practices.

Grant recipients and projects are listed on the ATS website and in the 2017 Annual Report. Initial reports from each of the grant recipients have been submitted, some will continue their work and submit final reports, and we will be reporting on the work over the next few months.

Slide 6:

What are graduates of ATS schools doing with their theological education? Where are they serving? What academic and ecclesial credentials did their positions require? What competencies are they utilizing in their work? A more comprehensive study of the religious workforce is needed, but this snapshot gives the schools a better idea of graduates’ service.

1. We surveyed graduates from a representative sample of 42 schools about the employment of two classes, 2011 and 2015.
2. We asked those graduates about their places of employment, job titles, educational and ecclesial expectations, and the competencies they need to do their work.

Slide 7:

Many other disciplines of educating for professions are wrestling with similar issues, and we can learn much from their efforts.

A study group met in late April/early May to explore issues in other graduate professional education and find out what they are learning. Representatives were present from law, medicine, social work, business, health humanities, education, and graduate humanities. (Our nursing person pulled out at the last minute.) The group will meet two more times over the next few months and we’ll share a report on the group’s findings. Some preliminary reflections.

1. It is clear that we’re all in the same cultural and educational soup.
2. In all, there are tensions between the academy and the professions.
3. All are concerned to contribute to the common good of society.
4. Medical education has begun to use a wonderful concept of developing “master adaptive learners.”
5. Alternative paths to credentials are present in a number of the disciplines.
6. In many disciplines, there is strong concern for the status and ranking of the school.

Slide 8:

What are the implications for the Standards of the effective practices that have been identified?

Ultimately, the project has been directed toward this final stage. Based on what we have learned, how should the accrediting standards and procedures be re-developed to maintain rigor and flexibility, while creating space for educational models not imagined or implemented in previous versions?

Slide 9:

All but 25 schools have been involved in one way or another. (Nine of them are associate or candidate members and so have only recently joined the Association.)

Slide 10:

Today's students bring (among other things):

- changed understandings and breadth of vocations,
- a need and desire for formation,
- intelligence,
- passion,
- less ecclesial formation (and knowledge of the Bible),
- significant life experience (many are second career; some are already in ministries),
- expectations about use of technologies, and
- strong expectations about the value and fit of their theological education.

Our study of graduates gave a few glimpses of where and how they are serving.

Slide 11:

In this study sample (42 schools; 940 responses; classes of 2011 and 2015)

- About half are serving in congregational or congregation-based ministries.
- About half are serving in a wide range of other roles, and places.
- A full third are in positions that do not require a master's degree.
- A fifth of those with titles of "pastor, minister, or priest" are serving in positions that do not require a master's degree.

Of the 320 respondents with titles of "pastor, minister, or priest," 99% indicated they have sensed a call to ministry and 93% believe their current position fulfills that sense of call.

Slide 12:

In the survey of graduates we asked, "In your current role, what skills/knowledge/dispositions do you rely on most heavily to do your work?"

The most commonly listed and utilized competency was "administration."

The total numbers of responses, include "duplicates," that is, some individual respondents listed a number of "administrative" skills that they utilize.

Administration, 605 responses

(A broad category including administrative work of various kinds and in a variety of contexts, such as church administration, congregational life, polity, church politics, management, organization, planning, and time management.)

Spiritual disciplines, 480 responses

Theology, 451 responses
Pastoral care and counseling 448, responses
Preaching 431, responses

Key points:

- Graduates are using competencies in administration (plus, “leadership” which was a separate category), is their preparation adequate?
- Graduates are using competencies in spiritual disciplines, is their preparation adequate?
Are our institutions equipped to prepare them?

Slide 13:

Interestingly, the **graduate professional study group** spent quite a bit of time discussing “formation.” The different disciplines use different language: “professional identity,” “humanistic qualities,” “bedside manner,” “character,” etc., but all were concerned about broad formation of students as persons.

The participants in the **peer groups** noted that there are different understandings of “formation” across the Association, but many are recognizing a shift from a focus on *professional* theological education (education for the “profession” of ministry), to the *formation* of persons to serve in an array of roles of religious leadership.

According to the MDiv Degree Program Standards, “The learning outcomes for the MDiv shall encompass the instructional areas of religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.”

The Program of Pastoral Formation of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops names four “pillars” or “dimensions” of formation: intellectual, pastoral, human, and spiritual. Schools across the Association use different language, and understand pathways of formation differently, but most encompass these four dimensions in one way or another.

The Gospel text from last Sunday (June 17), was Mark 4: 26-34, the parable of the sower. Seed sown disappears and we aren’t sure what might happen, but roots develop and continue to grow deep down.

Formation is like the growing of plants, much happens that is unheard and unseen, but we can see the effects over time. And formation can be seasonal. It requires patience, as the ordinary (yet miraculous), slow, hidden work of growth takes place. Some dimensions of formation can be difficult to assess, at least in the short term, but we can discern evidence.

Slide 14:

In the midst of all of the innovation and experimentation, there has been a strong underlying theme of the necessity of educational quality. Understandings of “educational quality” may vary somewhat, according to particular contexts, but all agree on the need to maintain highest expectations of quality. The schools are feeling pressures to maintain or increase enrollment, raise revenue, and encompass a range of diversities, but all are ultimately subordinated to educational quality.

Voices from across the project have insisted that the assessment of educational quality should be based on learning outcomes, regardless of educational model or practice.

The MDiv Duration peer group (programs that have reduced MDiv requirements), maintained that “No one wants to short change students on preparation for their careers in ministry and service.” Peer group report, p. 3.

The peer group studying programs to link Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees was initially called the “Accelerated Bachelors to MDiv” group, but members insisted that “speed is not a pedagogical value.” The group concluded that while programs of this type have often been framed as a financial necessity, there can also be educational advantages through program coherence and the opportunity to engage students in extended formation and community building.

I was struck by a remark in a recent article about students leaving the MDiv behind. The author referred to the MDiv as the “Cadillac” program. I think we might all agree that the MDiv is more like a basic “starter” car that gets you where you need to go, but needs regular updating and improving. Graduates of all our programs need lifelong learning, continuing education, and the ability to adapt to changing realities.

Slide 15: Bridges of Pittsburgh

Schools have been working very hard, and through many ways, to provide improved access to graduate theological education. Many of the peer groups focused attention on the issue of access, and many of the programs have been designed to provide access.

There are many programs designed for particular constituencies, some in languages other than English. Schools have given attention given to intercultural competency development within institutions.

Delivery systems providing enhanced access include online, hybrid, extension sites, global partnerships, contextual education in a number of forms, scheduling options, “stackable credentials,” and a number of programs offered in correctional facilities.

A number of schools have expressed ongoing concern about issues related to student educational debt as a barrier to study. Schools are increasingly attentive to the financial burdens theological education places on students. At the same time, schools face daunting institutional financial challenges and are extending themselves in extraordinary ways to provide affordable access to students. While students have certainly been carrying a larger portion of educational costs that previously had been borne by other institutions, such as denominational bodies, schools rarely pass on the full cost of education to students. Schools are hard at work, seeking a variety of sources of revenue to offset growing educational costs and exploring ways to reduce those costs.

Slide 16:

Enhancing cultural competence is a strong emphasis across many institutions:

- for students and graduates, and

- for faculty, staff, administrators, and boards.

The group exploring programs for Latino/a students and the Asian schools peer group also noted significant diversities *within* particular groups due to country of origin, generations, and various cultural practices.

Slide 17:

A great variety of collaborations are already underway, and many more are being explored.

They are of many different types:

- utilizing contexts of ministry,
- institutional collaborations between theological schools, theological schools and colleges and universities (some leading to affiliations and mergers), institutes, centers, denominations, judicatories, global partnerships, and
- with partner educators, e.g., mentors and spiritual directors.

Slide 18:

This slide shows faculty self-perception about their doctoral training, their current work, and their institution's support through faculty development related to these areas of work.

Nearly all of the educational and institutional changes we have identified have implications for the work of faculty.

Within our schools, I think the changes we are experiencing most profoundly affect the roles of faculty and have implications for their training, development, workload, balance of work, and other aspects of their roles.

Slide 19:

A few significant themes emerged from the faculty development grant reports.

- Perhaps the largest obstacle for faculty development is **time**. Even with funding from the project, schools had to work very hard to carve out time for development activities.
- Faculty are engaging in increasing amounts of **administrative work**.
- As their work changes, many faculty are experiencing a deep sense of **loss**.

Michael Jinkins, member of the Educational Models and Practices project advisory committee and recently-retired president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, reflected on a project he led about faculty as “theological educators” working in theological schools that prepare pastors and other religious leaders. He noted that many people enter PhD programs to prepare people for ministry, but end up graduating with a stronger “guild” mentality as they are shaped by their graduate school experience. He said that one impact of the program was to help people remember why they went into this vocation in the first place, and to return to their first love.

Slide 20:

Implications of what we learned.

The project has helped clarify the scope, range of needed adaptations.

There is a danger of becoming stuck in false binaries, in our society and in higher education.

Perhaps in theological education as well, between:

- academy and profession,
- traditional and new,
- seminary and church,
- men and women, and
- white and racial/ethnic persons.

Amid the diversities the Standards need to stretch at least this far

Slide 21:

There is some urgency to prepare people in less time, at less cost. Workers are needed for the harvest.

Yet, formation is slow, often hidden, silent, a challenge to measure, but it can be discerned. In one of our advisory committee conversations we pondered whether we are in the midst of a “fast food” spirituality. Are students overfed, through an overwhelming volume of information, but undernourished, needing the slow, contemplative, patient growth in formation necessary for effective religious leadership?

Slide 22:

Theological education is intensely relational. This relational character must be attended to, whether in distributed formats *or* in residential theological education. Community building doesn't happen as naturally as it perhaps once did. Many students now have adopted new ways of communicating and new patterns of connecting.

Slide 23:

I recently had a conversation with Wesley Parker, graduate of Northwest Baptist's program of Competency-Based Theological Education. Wesley stressed the importance of working with a faculty mentor, but also with a ministry/pastoral mentor and a network/denominational mentor. These mentors worked with him each step of the way through his theological education and he named the relationships as a highlight of his program at Northwest Baptist. And they continue to provide a support network for his ministry.

Slide 24:

Traditional degree requirements for admission have served an important role; bachelor's for admission to master's programs, master's for admission to doctoral programs.

Prior learning assessment for admission is emerging as an important process and measure for access to and fitness for graduate theological study.

I spoke with Maribelle Santos, a graduate of Calvin Seminary's program for Spanish-speaking pastors and other ministry leaders. Her experience in that program provided access to seminary and confirmed her ability to accomplish it. Maribelle has since enrolled in the Family Care

Master's degree program at Calvin. She was deeply grateful for the encouraging, welcoming community she found at Calvin, saying that having been there a while she could say, "I'm home!"

She spoke with deep appreciation of the different professors she had from Mexico, Cuba, Chile, and other countries, as well as Puerto Rico, and how each brought depth of cultural background and understanding, as well as significant differences.

Her studies are equipping her for an important ministry already underway within her community, as well as providing an opportunity for personal growth.

Slide 25:

As noted before, both master's and doctoral programs are providing education and formation for leaders in a wide variety of ministries and other roles. The Standards of Accreditation need to reflect the variety of roles for which theological schools are preparing their graduates.

Slide 26:

Schools need clarity of mission as well as adaptability to needs of students, emerging ways of service, etc. Every school cannot do everything. Each needs to identify distinctive strengths and mission emphases, and clarify their best allocation of resources.

Slide 27:

"Colleges [and we could add "theological schools"] are fundamentally conservative institutions for good reason. The long process of accumulating and transmitting knowledge from generation to generation is not served well by constant disruption." Beth McMurtrie, "The Future of Learning: How Colleges Can Transform the Educational Experience," 2018, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. 53.

For the April 2017 peer group forum we asked three experienced theological educators to address the question of what must not be lost in the midst of dramatic changes in theological schools and theological education. The speakers were Don Senior, of Catholic Theological Union, Emilie Townes of Vanderbilt Divinity School, and Mark Young of Denver Seminary. Their reflections, without particular instructions or coordinated agenda, each centered on an aspect of student formation. Don spoke of developing religious leaders as people of mercy, following the model of Pope Francis. Emilie stressed the need for our graduates to be caring leaders, people of love. And Mark stressed the need for religious leaders who are people of hope in the face of cultures of fear. In the midst of the significant differences between these three theological educators, their ecclesial and theological traditions, they converged on the formation of who students *are*, who they *become*, as at least as important as what they know or are able to do. A number of the peer groups have recommended that the four dimensions of formation be given more equal stress in redeveloped accrediting standards.

Slide 28: (I removed my family photo for privacy reasons!)

Like families, institutions experience cycles of birth, aging, and renewal.

In my own situation (and I'm sure in many of yours), these cycles are immediately present.

- My wife and I have aging parents; my 92-year-old mother in law lives with us; my 86-year-old father has been in the hospital off and on for a variety of ailments over the past 3 or 4 years.
- And not too long ago we welcomed grandsons George, now nearly 2, and just last week, Stephen.
- New life is not possible without the life that has gone before; carrying on some elements of it, bringing new beginnings and developments. The future is not possible without the past, and it carries the past within it.
- We look back to the long past and also forward with hope to an extensive future. Abraham Lincoln, on December 3, 1861, in his Annual Message to Congress, reviewed the past and reflected on the future. After recounting the progress of the United States in just 85 years, and noting the suggestion by some who believed that if the Union were preserved, some day there would be a population of 250 million, he said, "The struggle for today, is not altogether for today—it is for a vast future also." Our work today is not just for today, but for the futures of many generations to come.
- Hugh Heclo, in *On Thinking Institutionally*, makes reference to "Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*, [in which] the young nephew puts the point well to his complacent, aristocratic uncle (I paraphrase): 'If we want things to stay the same, there are going to have to be some changes.'"

As Frank Yamada noted earlier today, in the midst of all the change and stress, people in our schools have strong hope for the future.

In a Board of Commissioners meeting a few years ago, a visiting accreditor from another agency asked "what is *theological* about ATS accreditation?" Perhaps one aspect of the theological character of ATS work is that it attends to the work of the Holy Spirit, who often works through the weak, the marginalized, the unexpected, and the poor. And who nurtures hope toward unclear futures.

There is much work remaining to be done, there is pain to be borne. Yet there are also many signs of life and strength. Blessings on all of you for the journey, already underway.

Thank you.