

ATS announces grant to support schools amid COVID-19

By *MARISSA DECHANT*

The ATS Board of Directors approved the immediate implementation of a grant that will focus on supporting member schools through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The New Century Fund project, “Responding to COVID-19: Supporting ATS Schools,” went into effect at the start of May and will conclude by June 30, 2021. The grant looks to address the challenges theological schools are facing in the short, intermediate, and long terms, due to the current pandemic.

These challenges include the emergency measures taken to deliver distance education; a delayed placement of graduates in a depleted job market; and proposed budget and staff cuts at an increasing number of schools. All these changes still do not take into account the psychological and physical toll that sickness and death create in the virus’ wake.

Other aspects of the project include:

- Pivoting the mission-focused educational needs of the Association and Commission to address schools’ current and future realities in light of the pandemic
- Enhancing and redirecting the membership engagement strategic priority so that schools can share collective wisdom about their short- and long-term responses to COVID-19
- Using the momentum from the project as a means to shift organizational work and redirect currently funded projects to align with the strategic priorities of the Association given the emerging environment created by COVID-19



Possible ideas for the grant have been split among the three timeframes. While some of the more immediate-term projects have already been implemented, there are many unknowns of the actual long-term effects of the pandemic on society and the economy.

Immediate term

- Timely topic webinars
- Facilitating virtual “wisdom” panels of how schools are responding
- Specific research and data gathering about schools responses to COVID-19 and the interpreting and sharing of those data
- Launching of educational pilots around critical topics

Intermediate term

- Working with an educational design specialist to support the pivot of online and hybrid educational practices for the Association's and Commission's programming, conferences, professional development opportunities, and accrediting workshops
- Continue to develop educational modes of engagement for schools on implementing the new *Standards* that make sense in light of the longer-term effects of COVID-19
- Identification of schools who have pivoted successfully in areas of enrollment, educational redesign, faculty development, recruitment/enrollment/retention, student services provision, etc.; and developing case studies for distribution to schools
- Gathering data of larger factors that could impact the mission and finances of schools
- Development of courses for change management, leading through crisis, or relevant and timely topics
- Developing tools and resources for education and member engagement to support schools in the ways they are changing

Long term

- Commissioning studies that look at potential long-term effects of COVID-19 on the mission and finances of the schools, with a longitudinal analysis of the impact of other major crises (e.g., the financial crisis of 2008–09)
- Equipping and developing staff in digital, online, and hybrid forms of meeting to design forms of education and engagement beyond the current model, which is primarily conference-based
- Investing in the member schools through incentivized education and leadership development, leveraging the expertise among leaders in schools

The grant's design will leverage this moment of disruption in order to support the work of ATS schools as they seek to adapt to the environment that's emerging in the wake of COVID-19. It will invest in the ATS membership and staff to redesign educational offerings, enhance online forms of engagement, support the implementation of the new *Standards*, curate just-in-time resources, and generate timely research to better serve the member schools in these unusual times.



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