

ATS development and communication officers engage in first virtual learning gathering

BY MARY H. YOUNG

With the pivot to virtual experiences, ATS has been building upon a philosophy of sustained engagement for its leadership education gatherings using Zoom and a learning management system called Canvas. Earlier this month, ATS development and communication leaders engaged in a four-day event—"Building Relationships for Effective Fundraising"—that incorporated asynchronous activities through Canvas and synchronous meetings through Zoom.

Designed as the first of three learning experiences for development and communication officers this year, the experience included an opportunity to learn about a recent study of chief development officers, connect and network with colleagues, and engage four key content areas related to their work. Built into the learning experience were opportunities for conversation with the content providers and small group sessions of like schools or denominational affiliations.

"Although we can't meet together face to face, we hope this experience will be informative, engaging, and renewing to your spirit," said Kitty Norton, assistant dean for development and alumni relations at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and chair of the ATS Development Officers' Steering Committee, as she welcomed participants.



The chief development officers' study

In late 2019, ATS launched a study of six leadership education groups, one of which was chief development officers. The goal was to better understand the role of these leaders and to identify needs that could be addressed with an updated curriculum for leadership education. The [ATS Study of Chief Development Officers Final Report](#) synthesizes the findings to help better understand the role of the chief development officer today and how the profession has changed. The findings from the study informed the content provided in the Canvas-based learning experience for the week.

David Heetland was the role advisor for the study, having served as the chief development officer at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary for 35 years. Participants of the gathering were able to view a question and answer session between Heetland and ATS Director



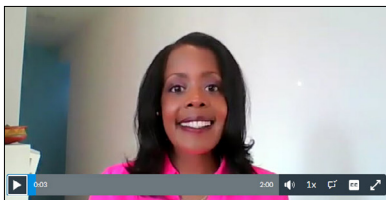
Mary Young interviews David Heetland about the findings from the ATS Study of Chief Development Officers.

of Leadership Education Mary Young as part of the asynchronous sessions. Young asked about the biggest differences for development officers between now and five years ago, the greatest challenges, and the predictors of longevity and effectiveness for development officers today.

Engaging the content

During the asynchronous engagement in Canvas, participants explored four areas of content provided by colleagues who are doing this work and/or publishing about it.

The Art of Fundraising module focused on how to meet donors of various giving capacities and build relationships with them. The content was provided by Wanda Scott of Wanda Scott and Associates. She asked participants if



Wanda Scott welcomes participants to a session on the art of fundraising.

they “unconsciously make assumptions about their donors’ giving trends and invited them to reflect on how their teams can “think differently about gift request

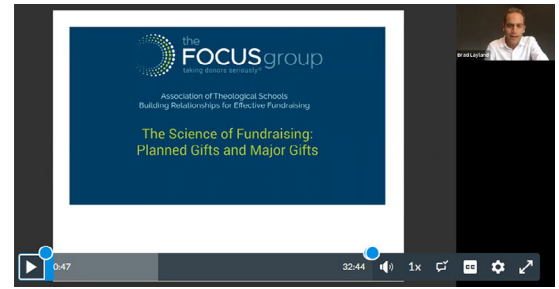
strategies.” According to Scott, “asking questions and listening deeply is vital to building authentic relationships.”

“Just last week, I experienced, first-hand, the value of connecting a donor’s giving with their personal story and passions. It was a powerful moment and we both got chills during our phone conversation—not even in person,” said one participant after watching Scott’s presentation.

Led by Brad Layland, chief executive officer of the Focus Group, *the Science of Fundraising* module dealt with specific strategies related to planned gifts and major gifts. He explained the different stages of engaging donors over time.

“I appreciated Brad’s definition for potential major and estate donors at the top of his presentation. These are helpful frameworks as we seek to evaluate and segment

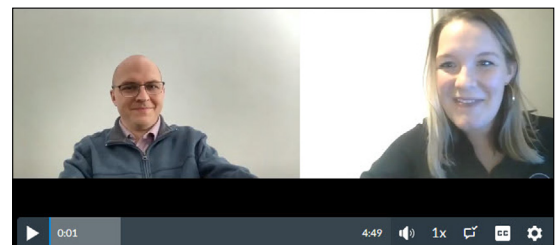
our current donor list and conduct additional research on these individuals,” said an attendee.



Brad Layland discusses planned gifts and major gifts.

The **Communication** module included several resources that focused on engaging the next generation of donors and provided an opportunity for participants to share some of their own good practices about the ways their development teams may be reaching out to younger donors. When asked what their team’s greatest challenges were in engaging the next generation of donors, participants noted that often it can be a bit difficult to connect the story of the seminary to the stories and values of millennials and Gen Zers “who are drawn to solving problems around human rights, the environment, and social justice.” Participants in that module agreed that this is especially the case when the current donor base may have a different set of priorities.

Leadership, the final content module for the learning experience, was resourced by Becca Warren and Jonathan Goforth. They serve as members of the development team at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Using two questions as conversational prompts for discerning the importance of positive leadership, they asked participants:



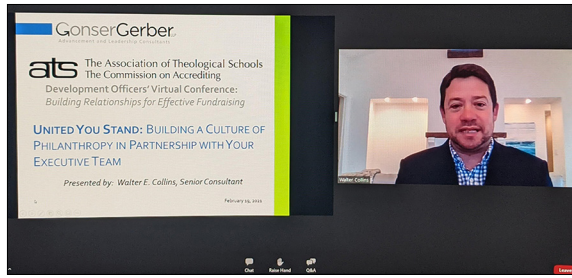
Jonathan Goforth and Becca Warren present on leadership.

(1) What are three words that come to your mind when you think about leadership? and (2) Who has been your favorite boss and why?

One participant listed the words “inclusive,” “encouraging,” and “capable,” and wrote “This was a great reminder of how important it is to really know our colleagues and be as interested in them personally as we are with our donors personally (and strategically).”

Once attendees had a chance to work through the asynchronous sessions in Canvas, a Zoom meeting brought them together and offered the option to choose a “breakout room” with the presenter of their choice—Scott, Layland, or Warren—to ask questions and find out more about that presenter’s area of expertise. Two more “breakout room” discussions were held for attendees to comment on how their schools’ ecclesial affiliations determine the execution of the development practices discussed in Canvas and to talk about which aspects of the event’s content were consistent with their schools’ development practices and which were not.

Participants joined other leaders from their institutions at the end of the week in a webinar designed to explore how, together, they can play a pivotal role in achieving their schools’ development goals and objectives. The webinar, “United You Stand: Building A Culture of



Walter Collins leads a webinar for all ATS leaders on building a culture of philanthropy.

Philanthropy in Partnership with Your Executive Team,” was led by Walter Collins, senior consultant with Gonsler Gerber, LLP. Collins stated that “institutional leadership is important to advancement success.” When speaking of creating a culture of philanthropy at your school, he

stressed that “people don’t engage because of what you are doing, they engage because of why you are doing it.”

Those who have not yet connected to the Canvas site can still take advantage of the learning modules and the newly added resources page from the gathering, as the site will be available to development and communication personnel for the remainder of the year. Announcements will be sent when updates are provided and when invitations to connect with colleagues are extended. Future online learning experiences for this group are planned for June and October this year.

In addition, the Development Officers’ community and the Communications Personnel community on Engage ATS are also spaces where leaders can continue learning, resource sharing, and collegial networking around their work.



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