

ATS launches initiative to build capacity for cultural competence

By MARY H. YOUNG

A new initiative is underway to increase the effectiveness of ATS schools in educating racial/ethnic students—and all students—in cultural competence. Building on recent research conducted on behalf of the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), the initiative has launched with the participation of teams from 20 member schools. Each team will identify an educational issue of importance to the institution and develop a strategy to address that issue.

Teams of both faculty and students from participating schools will work within their schools for the next two years to develop and implement their educational strategies. Upon request, each team is being supported by a coach or consultants with particular expertise in the school's area of work.

In addition to providing intermediate status reports, the school teams will return for a second conference at the end of two years to report on their efforts, what they have learned, and what application their learning may have for other ATS member schools; participants attended an initial meeting in October 2018 and will reconvene in October 2020.

Schools are employing a variety of strategies to move them along in their work. One institution has identified a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) consultant to help guide their planning and implementation over the next two years. Other institutions have intercultural studies courses and programs in place and will examine ways to broaden the impact of that work in ways that affect systemic and institutional changes. Some of the institutions involved have curricular and cocurricular activities



designed for specific ethnic groups but also realize the need to expose white students and faculty to issues of white privilege and systemic racism.

Schools engaged in this initiative include a balanced collection of embedded and independent schools as well as representation from each of ATS's ecclesial families. There are two Canadian and 18 US schools in the group. Among the US schools are 15 predominantly white institutions, two historically black theological schools, and one Asian-serving school; some of the schools serve significant Latino/a student populations.

New voices—fresh vision

The initiative is capturing the significant and important voices of students to help describe the racial/ethnic realities in which they currently study and do ministry, and to

help name strategic programmatic ideas that will serve to address some of those current realities. At the launching conference last October, students participated with school teams in leading conference devotions, served as conversational partners in mixed groups of faculty and administrators, and formed their own peer conversational group distinct from the faculty and administrator groups.

Over the course of the two-day conference, groups reflected upon four significant questions and responded with fresh insights such as the following:

1. What best practice can your school share about educating minoritized students?
 - ♦ “Ensuring that course texts represent a variety of voices, particularly those of women and people of color.”
 - ♦ “We believe in resourcing our students (all differently minoritized—class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, immigration or religious identity) to lead in public ways at all school events.”
2. How is your school preparing all students to more effectively serve in racially and ethnically diverse communities?
 - “With 50% of our students non-white, conversation about contextualized ministry among diverse racial/ethnic groups is common.”
 - “Dismantling racism is one of the institution’s core missional values, and this works out through the reworking of the curriculum.”
3. What are your greatest *institutional strengths* for educating students to serve in a racially and ethnically diverse society?
 - “[We have] Chinese seminary integration with English classes; strong population of international students; and an intercultural studies program.”

- “The Catholic tradition has many official documents that address, or at least discuss this topic. Some of these documents are covered in our courses.”
4. What are your greatest *institutional challenges* with educating students for service in a racially and ethnically diverse society?
 - “Making such education integral to courses offered across the curriculum.”
 - “Faculty diversity does not reflect student diversity.”
 - “Limited financial resources to fund programs specifically geared toward diverse students.”

From the varied group conversations emerged a plethora of both encouraging and effective practices, even amid real challenges related to educating students to serve in racially and ethnically diverse ministerial contexts. School representatives acknowledged the inherent difficulty with effecting change at the institutional level. But they were optimistic about possible ways to move forward in a number of areas: curriculum design; support of racial/ethnic faculty and students; attention to diversity, equity and inclusion programs; intentional planning for community engagement; and involvement of institutional and board leaders in implementing systemic change.

The student small group session provided an opportunity for them to identify ways in which current curricular designs at their institutions are preparing them for ministry in racially diverse contexts, but to also identify what they perceived to be institutional challenges.



A discussion group meets at the Cultivating Educational Capacity Conference in Pittsburgh last October.

Other conference highlights

Three school teams provided refreshing devotional presentations. One team engaged attendees in a “circle of commitment” activity to encourage healthy group interactions and dialogue around tough topics.



Mary H. Young, ATS director of leadership education, and Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, shared CORE research and current racial/ethnic data from ATS member schools.

Keynote speaker Jared E. Alcántara, Paul W. Powell Endowed Chair in Preaching at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, led an energy-filled plenary titled “Cultivating Intercultural Competence in our Students and Ourselves.”

He spoke extensively about efforts in gauging connectivity with issues of race and ethnicity, indicating that

“school policy, personal style, and practice” are three levels of connectivity. Alcántara described intercultural competence, a way of connecting, as a “deliberate practice”.

ATS Executive Director Frank M. Yamada spoke of the Association's continuing commitment to the work of CORE, sharing personal reflections from his time working with teams for the CORE 2040 Project and speaking passionately about the current work ATS is called to do with member schools.

Film producer Martin Doblmeier, of Journey Films, presented a private advance viewing of *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*, after which conference participants engaged in discussions about incorporating the writings of Thurman into curricular design.

This initiative is a robust effort on behalf of ATS and member schools to address issues that enable member schools to live into their commitments to diversity, cultural awareness training, and the preparation of students to serve in a variety of ministerial communities and contexts.

ATS is committed to diversity as one of its four core values. Through the work of CORE, the Association seeks to energize efforts toward preparing member schools and the students they serve for ministry in multicultural and multiracial contexts.

This work is also in alignment with the ATS policy guideline on *Striving for Culturally Competent School Communities*, adopted by the ATS membership in 2010.

Ultimately, the work of the seminaries involved in this two-year project and the resources they create will be shared with the full membership.



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