

# ATS responds to Novel Coronavirus and COVID-19

BY FRANK M. YAMADA

*One of the most consistent messages I used to hear from my predecessor, Dan Aleshire, was that theological schools are resilient. When facing enrollment challenges, after the market crashes of the past 25 years, even when facing global crises and world wars, theological schools have proven over time that they can adapt, survive, and even thrive in the middle of a crisis.*

The American Association of Theological Schools (the original name of The Association of Theological Schools) was formed in 1918 in the aftermath of World War I. It may be part of the Association's DNA to respond faithfully to the crises of our day.

The Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and the COVID-19 disease have challenged us. We have heard from most of the member schools during the past few weeks and—without exception—they are having to respond to crises in their immediate, intermediate, and long-term situations. Schools have sought to protect the health and safety of their faculty, staff, and students while attending to local or federal government mandates to “stay in place.” Courses have been moving to online formats, faculty have been converting their courses, in-person commencements have been cancelled, and Zoom meetings have proliferated. Theological schools are exercising resilience in a time when the world changes weekly, if not daily.



To respond to these situations, the ATS staff has been working remotely for the past two weeks—complying with the Pennsylvania governor's call for social distancing—to support and resource the schools at this critical time. The office building is closed, but there is important and creative work happening.

Both the ATS Board of Directors and the ATS Board of Commissioners have taken actions recently to assist schools as they seek their own responses to the pandemic. You can find information and resources on the Association's [resource page](#). Here is a list of things you should know.

## **Accreditation matters**

- **Educational flexibility.** The Board of Commissioners voted to allow for temporary educational flexibility during this public health emergency. “Schools may use online or other technologies to accommodate students on a temporary basis, waiving any applicable residential degree program requirements and waiving the need for comprehensive distance education approval for any schools without it.”

- **Visits.** The Board of Commissioners has authorized two options for schools who were scheduled for comprehensive or focused visits in spring 2020. At the discretion of the Commission staff, in consultation with the school, the school: 1) may postpone the visit with the resulting extension of accreditation, or 2) may have the visit conducted online.

## **ATS meetings and initiative gatherings**

- **Leadership Education and initiative gatherings.**

The following Leadership Education events and Association initiatives have been rescheduled and/or are doing work online: 2020 Student Personnel Administrators' Conference, (Jacksonville, FL); Women in Leadership Mentoring Program Launching Conference (Jacksonville, FL); 2020 Roundtable Seminar for New Faculty (Jacksonville, FL); and the Small Schools Gathering (Pittsburgh, PA).

- **2020 Academic Officers' preconference** (June 23); **2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting** (June 24–25) in Vancouver, BC. The Biennial Meeting will now allow for electronic participation and voting. The location's venue has not been canceled as of March 30, 2020. ATS boards and staff have planned for contingencies, including the possibility of a completely online meeting, should travel not be safe or permitted. ATS staff will communicate more in the coming days and weeks.
- **Board meetings moving online.** The boards of the Association and Commission will be conducting business in April, but both board meetings have been moved to online formats with synchronous and asynchronous components. The Board of Commissioners has a joint meeting with the Redevelopment Task Force this week; the Board of Directors will be

meeting virtually later in April for its spring pre-Biennial Meeting business.

Throughout this pandemic, schools have been resourcing one another online. Last fall, ATS launched an online community website for member schools, Engage ATS. Forums have been very active, as members are sharing what has been happening on their campuses as well as the practices they have incorporated to teach out their spring and address areas of campus health. If you have any questions about registering for Engage ATS or are having trouble connecting, please reach out to Lisa Kern, ATS manager of member engagement.

All of these actions and responses share at least two themes. First, both the member schools and the ATS staff are recognizing the significant challenge of responding to an environment that is changing every week, even every day or every hour. We are also recognizing the opportunity of working and seeking to achieve mission in new ways—through technology, through twenty-first century connectedness, and through creative adaptation. Second, schools are demonstrating resilience in ATS ways—ways that are particular to each school's mission and tradition. The pandemic has not led to a spirit of resignation among the schools, but it has provoked their resiliencies and their abilities to respond to the crisis of this day.

I encourage all of you who work in ATS member schools to be healthy and stay safe. In the middle of this global health crisis, we have emphasized the need to keep the well-being of personnel and students at ATS schools and the ATS staff as a high priority. May God's peace preserve and protect us in the days and weeks ahead even as we continue "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public."



*Frank M. Yamada is Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*