

"Time for a reset" in theological education: 200 gather to discuss innovation at Education Models and Practices Forum

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN



“The ordinary solutions are just not sufficient anymore for many schools. Is it time for a reset?” Stephen Graham of the Association of Theological Schools challenged the 200+ participants from 93 schools in a recent meeting of theological educators in Pittsburgh to think in new ways about how they do their work. The meeting was just one part of the Educational Models and Practices project, and it assembled 16 peer groups to study the educational effectiveness of a range of educational models such as reduced credit-hour Master of Divinity degrees, enhanced online programs, programs for Catholic laity, global partnerships, programs catering to students from specific ethnic demographics, programs for students in prison, and competency-based education, among others.

The four-year, \$6 million Educational Models and Practices project, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., has been described as a game-changer for theological education, which has been experiencing the same decade-long enrollment declines and financial stresses that plague the rest of higher education.

The peer groups are part of a major research initiative to identify and assess the various innovations that schools are already devising and to encourage them to

think creatively about theological education. Already, ATS has learned a great deal from the 270 ATS member schools about residency and commuter patterns, about online course delivery practices, about partnerships with churches and global partners, and about specialized programs for particular constituencies. During the next year, the 16 peer groups will identify and address crucial issues and questions, identify indicators of quality and effectiveness, nurture innovative thinking, and ultimately report their findings for the benefit of the wider membership.

Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services, is directing the project and notes, "A great deal of the expertise needed to address the challenges and embrace the opportunities currently present for theological schools resides in the schools themselves, and we believe that collaboration among the schools that are working on similar models and practices will produce even greater wisdom."

This sort of exploration—thinking innovatively and looking for new ways of designing and delivering theological education—calls for creativity and a willingness to think more comprehensively about the Standards of Accreditation that govern the Association's 246 fully-accredited member schools. "I don't know another accrediting agency that is issuing invitations to innovate," said presenter Charla Long, principal and senior consultant of Go Long Consulting and the creator of Lipscomb University's nationally acclaimed competency-based education model. Since the revision of the standards approved in 2010 and 2012, the Board of Commissioners of the ATS Commission on Accrediting has approved more than 50 petitions for exceptions and experiments.

Long spoke about assessment of learning and its implications for educational models and practices including competency-based education.

Among the other phases of the Educational Models and Practices project will be a comparative study of other patterns of graduate professional education such as law, medicine, business, and other human service professions and a study of the religious workforce and the needs of the workplaces that employ theological school graduates.

Graham also described yet another phase of the project in which schools will be encouraged to apply for innovation and faculty development grants to develop or move forward work with innovative educational models or practices, and to help faculty adapt to new models and

practices. The project will award between 30 and 50 "innovation" grants of between \$25,000 and \$50,000 each and faculty development grants of up to \$15,000 for as many as 30 schools. A request for proposals will be distributed in late 2016 or early 2017.

Excitement about the project is mounting as more theological educators get involved. When asked, "What aspects of the forum were most valuable to you?", forum participants cited some common themes: "a common understanding of shared difficulties and opportunities, asking the same questions from diverse vantage points," "naming the crisis and changing the ethos," "meeting and interacting with a great cross-section of theological leaders from so many institutions doing such innovative and effective work," "hearing a clear message that ATS is encouraging experimentation and innovation."

[Hear more of what Charla has to say](#)

One participant said, "New models may seem intimidating but offer expanded opportunities for growth." Another concluded, "Almost every session was a home run for me! One of the best 2.5 days I have ever spent at a conference!"

Looking ahead, findings from the Educational Models project will inform the next redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation beginning in 2018 or soon thereafter, looking toward a future that is yet to be conceived. As ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire explained to the forum participants, "We aren't done inventing what we are going to teach. And we aren't done inventing how we're going to teach it. And hopefully, we are not yet done finding all of the people whom we should teach."



Eliza Smith Brown is Director, Communications and External Relations for The Association of Theological Schools.