

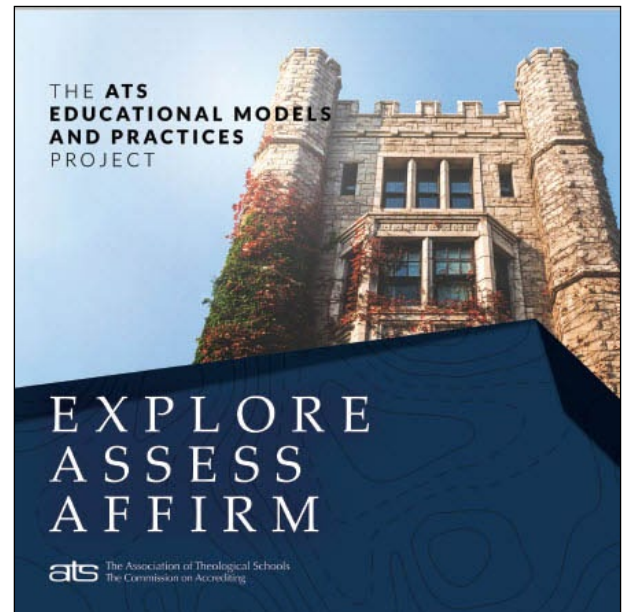
Educational Models and Practices peer group reports reveal insights and innovations

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

After a year and a half of work, the 18 peer groups of the Educational Models and Practices project have submitted their final reports, and they are now available [online](#). This work has involved more than 260 individuals from 110 ATS member schools. In addition to a few seminary presidents, the project participants included approximately 40% deans, 30% program directors, and 30% faculty.

Each peer group report includes an explanation as to why the group engaged the topic and addresses crucial issues and questions associated with the model or practice as well as opportunities and benefits, challenges and obstacles, the assessment of educational effectiveness, educational principles, implications for the accrediting standards, and recommended practices. Many of the groups cited unexpected insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities that have emerged through this work.

Two of the groups examined online teaching and learning and offered a wealth of advice to schools interested in engaging that model as well as to those who will eventually work on redevelopment of the standards. One of the groups reported 13 “myths” about online education and shared multiple findings. Among the findings: “The standards should require each institution to define ‘formation’ for each degree and incorporate that definition into its statement of learning objectives for each degree.” Another stated, “Not only do online courses make education more accessible to students; they make students more accessible to teachers”



The group studying the [duration of the Master of Divinity degree](#) asked some hard questions about the intent of the degree and how it responds to current realities in education and ministry: Is the MDiv a *professional* degree, is it an *academic* degree, or is it by nature *both*? Can a single degree program of three to four years' duration provide both excellent professional preparation for ministry in virtually any context and sufficient academic rigor to qualify for academic doctoral programs? Is the MDiv a *foundational* or a *terminal* qualification for ministry? What should be the relationship between the professional MA and the MDiv? Does the understanding of the professional MA as an inherently “limited” degree hold up in a context where many MA holders lead ministries with a great deal of autonomy and where many church bodies grant them equal voice and vote in church councils? Should pathways for further education be defined for both professional degrees?

Two other groups studied accelerated programs—one to [combine the bachelor's and MDiv degrees](#) and one that serves [students without bachelor's degrees](#).

Two peer groups studied the Doctor of Ministry degree, one looking at [DMin admission requirements](#) and the other at the [“identity” of the DMin](#). According to their reports, “recent changes in ministry and education appear to indicate a need to create new potential pathways to MDiv equivalency for DMin admission.” This requires a new way of assessing basic competency for successful DMin study—including prior theological formation and ministerial experience. To that end, one group identified four Intended Outcomes of a DMin Program—along with entry-level competencies—that a school could use in the particularity of its context.

One group focused on [formation of laity in Roman Catholic schools](#) and developed six guiding principles for lay formation that encompass all four pillars, or dimensions, of formation: pastoral, intellectual, spiritual, and human.

Two peer groups studied global partnerships. As one report admitted, “Global partnerships, in their proliferations, have become too unwieldy for clear or common views of models or practices to emerge readily.” Yet, because theological schools “exist to help the global Church to accomplish what God intends in the world,” both groups worked to identify ways to improve global engagement. They found that the most crucial issues and questions are “the intertwined complexities of reciprocity, spiritual formation in study abroad or immersion learning experiences, and international accreditation.” And they offered concrete practical advice, detailing the core elements of an effective partnership. As one group summarized, “Obstacles may be diminished by partners who value mutually agreed upon terms and standards of effectiveness, while understanding that not all relationships will be symmetrical; share financial resource partners; hold a core respect of the “other” and a willingness to learn, live, and minister together; and finally, acknowledge the danger of creating theological and ecclesiological silos.”

As enrollment of students of color is on the rise, even as seminary enrollment in general is in decline, three peer groups focused on programs focused on specific racial/ethnic constituencies: one on [programs for Latino/a students](#), one on [Asian/Asian American schools](#), and one on [historically black theological schools](#).

Latino/as comprise a growing segment of the population who are members of Christian churches in the US and Canada. A number of schools focus on serving this growing population, the percentage of which is not yet mirrored in either enrollment or faculty appointments at ATS schools. The peer group identified crucial areas for the recruitment and retention of Latino/a students: accelerated programs, prior learning and competency assessment, programming, finances, and the cultural competence of institutions involved in theological education. It also developed a tool for auditing institutions in terms of their service to Latino/a students and lifted up recent scholarship and other resources regarding flexible “on ramps” into theological education.

The ATS membership currently includes 12 Asian schools, rooted in US immigrant communities but also strongly aligned with schools in Asia. That peer group focused on issues of formation of second-generation church leaders; expansion of educational programs through transnational connections; and collaborative partnership among the Asian schools. Among the challenges the group touched upon is the unique cultural space that Chinese and Korean immigrant Christians occupy, inhabiting an expansive space in which evangelicalism sometimes coexists with Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and folk religion.

The six historically black theological schools shared a condensed list of their practices that can apply to the broader ATS membership. In response to the question, “What is the distinctive academic anthropology that connects the experiences of the HBTS schools?” the group cited the availability of faculty and staff to be with the whole person as part of a person-centered pedagogy, in the classroom and beyond.

Finally, one group focused on [programs in prison](#) leading to either a degree or a certificate. Generally, the degree programs draw upon graduate theological faculty to offer degrees through satellite locations of undergraduate institutions. In the certificate model, professors from ATS member school go into local prisons to teach, bringing MDiv and MTS students with them to learn as fellow-students alongside the incarcerated learners. This highly contextual model has proven to be transformational for everyone involved. Expanding its use, however, would likely call for rethinking aspects of the accrediting standards in terms of such issues as undergraduate education and the 15% rule, stackable credentials, and competency-based education.

According to Steve Graham, senior director of programs and services at ATS, “These reports offer a practical

review of models and practices that are working in some contexts and could be adopted with success in others. They represent the best thinking and experience of dozens of theological educators who are eager to share their learnings with colleagues throughout the ATS membership.”

These reports also recognize the complexities that the ATS membership must wrestle with as it prepares to consider redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation. As stated in the peer group report on duration of the MDiv, “Theological education is not monolithic. Individual religious traditions have unique and valuable perspectives. Individual students have unique needs, capabilities, and resources. Schools must be flexible and responsive to the needs of their constituents.”



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