

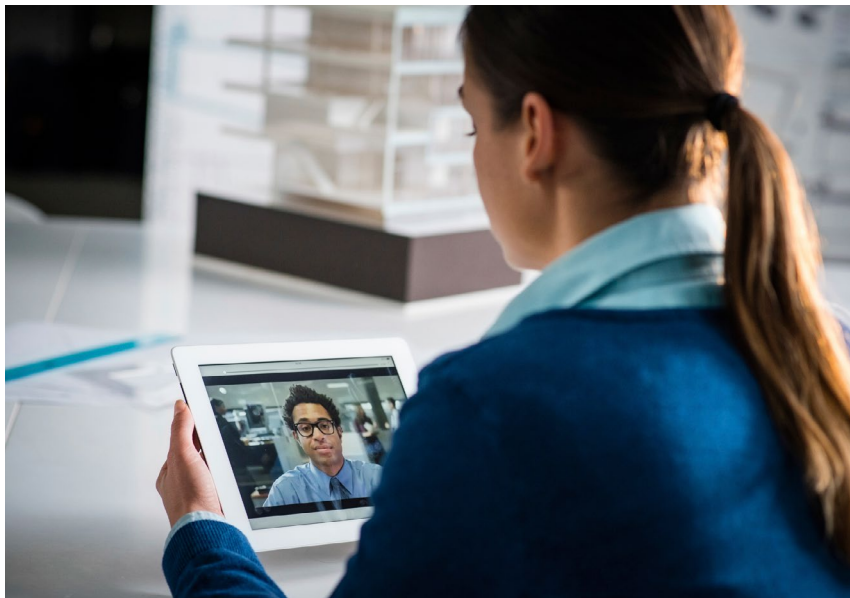
Accessible, effective: How online theological education is shifting the formation model

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

As part of the Educational Models and Practices project, participants in the **Formation in Online Contexts** peer group are focusing on challenges, successes, and best practices associated with formation in programs that utilize a virtual learning environment.

Currently, more than half of ATS member schools—143 out of 275—offer [comprehensive distance education programs](#) that have been approved by the Board of Commissioners of ATS. In addition, [26 schools offer the MDiv and/or professional MAs \(Standard B\) degrees fully online](#). More are joining in with each new academic year. But just how well are these programs doing in the area that continues to worry so many theological educators, keeping many schools from venturing into online education—**formation**?

The ATS Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., has assigned a peer group of theological educators to focus a critical eye on formation in online contexts. The group, one of 18 peer groups assembled for the EMP project, consists of 17 faculty and administrators from seven theological schools. Charged with naming and addressing crucial issues and questions, identifying indicators of quality and effectiveness, and nurturing innovative thinking, the group is meeting periodically over the course of two years and will share its findings in a final report in fall 2017.



There are still plenty of skeptics.

Online education may be widely accepted as suitable for “content-heavy” courses that emphasize intellectual formation, but many wonder whether spiritual or human formation can be addressed without face-to-face time on campus. Even those involved in successful online programs acknowledge the hurdles. They cite challenges such as the complexity of building community online and the danger of students feeling isolated, often in provincial or even unhealthy ministry environments that stifle growth and limit their access to faculty role models and other students. Some argue that faculty don’t appreciate the importance of formation or the feasibility of doing it online and are not trained to do it effectively. Still others maintain that adjuncts and volunteers charged with formation are not adequately prepared or fully integrated into the school culture. And just as in face-to-face contexts, when professors function as mentors, issues can arise with boundaries and confidentiality concerns.

Another topic of interest is the labor-intensive nature of the online formation model, which can rely heavily on volunteers at the parishes and other sites where students are engaged in ministry. Is the volunteer model sustainable? This peer group will study that question.

But to some, online formation is not only possible . . . it can even be preferable.

In describing the benefits of the online context for formation, the peer group uses words like *accessible*, *communal*, *contextual*, and *global*.

Drawing on the four pillars in the Program of Priestly Formation, Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago bases its program on the belief that “formation is connecting the ministry student’s intellectual and pastoral learning with the human and spiritual experiences in life.” CTU has a model for addressing each of the four components online. Peer group participants see the benefits not only for students but also for parishioners. The online format has potential for use in the formation of people in congregations, working in small groups from home with facilitation by a trained minister.

At Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana, students are encouraged to see themselves as citizens of “the world village united in Christ.” Wesley’s student body of more than 500—80% of them studying online—includes 42% racial/ethnic students, an international contingent from 10 different countries, an age range from 22 to 82, and a mix of 38 denominations in addition to the sponsoring Wesleyan Church. More than 75% of Wesley’s students are following a personal desire for more education, not any denominational requirement.

As schools experiment and innovate their way into the future, effective models for online formation are emerging.

Some formation occurs at the **curricular level**. Assembled in cohorts of students who are already engaged in ministry, MDiv students at Wesley take a sequence of six courses—one each semester—focused on their own personal spiritual formations and “intentionally leading

them deeper in thought, experience, and engagement . . . and requiring transparency.” The program uses the online learning platform’s journal function to facilitate one-to-one conversation.

At Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) in Lexington, Kentucky, most courses are expected to have a learning goal in the area of spiritual formation. Entering students must take a course called Prayer and Praxis within their first eight credit hours. The work of the course is then continued throughout a student’s degree program in Covenant Groups that include both a faculty member and an experienced pastor, and all MDiv students are required to be in an accountable ministry site at least 10 hours per week throughout the degree program. Peer group members from LTS say that, since they moved most of their program online, they actually give more attention to formation than they did as a residential program.

Many models focus on a robust **mentoring** program. At LTS, all MDiv students are required to have a mentor. Wesley now intentionally hires faculty who are equipped to lead spiritual formation groups.

But the formation role can extend far beyond campus with what Wesley Seminary describes as “a matrix of learning for formation” of which the seminary is just one part. Peer group members agree that the work of this project has lifted up the possibility that seminaries no longer have to be the center of formation. Now that students are able to stay at home and remain embedded within their own communities, they will have their vocational, personal, religious, and spiritual lives nurtured there.

At Gateway Seminary in Ontario, California, each student is assigned a 360-degree feedback team that includes a field mentor, a spiritual mentor, and an evaluative lay ministry group from the student’s ministry context. Likewise, Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, North Carolina, engages many groups within each student’s context—including families—in the formation process. Advocates of this model note that

contextual education connects seminaries more closely with the communities of faith they are serving.

Some of the emerging models demonstrate the importance of **infrastructure** to support online teaching and learning. LTS, for example, has instituted a common syllabus structure, common course management technology platform, and training by an information technologist with an educational background. And some schools are beginning to count formation activities as faculty workload and to compensate accordingly. As part of its faculty assessment strategy, Moody Theological Seminary in Chicago gathers data about the number and quality of contacts faculty have with students and evaluates faculty effectiveness in relating meaningfully with students online.

How will we know if we're succeeding?

Among the most daunting challenges is how formation is **defined and measured** in an online learning environment. The peer group's consensus is that formation must be defined for each school according to its mission and the goals for each particular degree program. The group is identifying tools and processes for schools to use in measuring formation, which it will assess and present as part of its final report.

Across the spectrum of ATS member schools, however, students are already giving high marks to their online experiences, according to data gathered by the Graduating Student Questionnaires administered in 2015–2016

by ATS. In 11 out of 15 areas of **personal growth**—including, for example, enthusiasm for learning, respect for my religious tradition, trust in God, and strength of spiritual life—students who took the majority of their coursework online responded with higher ratings than did students who studied in a traditional main campus environment. Likewise, in assessing their **skill levels**—in areas such as ability to think theologically, ability to give spiritual direction, and ability to lead others—online students gave higher ratings than traditional on-campus students in 12 out of 20 categories.

Moving toward accrediting standards revision

The final report from this peer group—as well as those from the other 17 groups working on the Educational Models and Practices project—will inform the next revision of the Standards of Accreditation, which the ATS membership may be asked to launch as early as 2018.

According to Stephen Graham, senior director of programs and services at ATS as well as director of the ATS Educational Models and Practices project and the facilitator for this peer group, “The next set of accrediting standards will need to affirm the importance of formation, recognize different understandings of formation among the different denominational and ecclesial traditions of member schools, and require the schools to demonstrate attainment of their own learning goals related to formation, whatever their educational models.”



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