

Fulfilling the ATS mission through expanded vision: An interview with Lester Edwin J. Ruiz about the Global Engagement Initiative

The summer issue of Colloquy Online announced an expanded commitment to the ATS Global Engagement Initiative, a strategic priority adopted by the ATS board in 2013. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz will champion the initiative to build relationships with theological educators and institutions worldwide. The hope is for a meaningful flow of scholarship, resources, and expertise between ATS and its global partners. In a recent interview (abridged here), Ruiz shared the thinking that led ATS to commit to this initiative, how it is expected to unfold, and how the membership can expect to benefit from it.

A [transcript of the full interview](#) is also available.

Q: Global engagement could take many forms. What does it mean in the context of the work of ATS? What will be the main components of this work?

A: For the next two years, the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative will work toward developing and



Lester Edwin J. Ruiz addresses students and faculty at Trinity Theological College, Dimapur, Nagaland, August 17, 2018, on the topic, “The Futures of Theological Education: local, national, global.”

enhancing the structures and processes within ATS and beyond, in order to address or achieve the following:

- Discerning and developing collaborative **partnerships** at all levels—local, national, regional, and global
- Cultivating **scholarly and programmatic “trade routes”** between the global North and the global South to promote sustainable, reciprocal flows of resources, expertise, and information in the service of learning, teaching, and research
- Contributing to a **pan-Christian conversation** about theological education among global constituents and their various publics
- Exploring **programs of study** that allow for comparable, flexible, and transferable degrees and credentials; acceptable and reliable quality-assurance processes; and mutual institutional recognition, support, collegiality, and collaboration

Q: Why now? What has led us to this point, and what indications have you seen that global partners are ready for this?

A: ATS has been working toward cultivating a more global theological perspective since the 1980s. But three more recent historical developments in the global landscape pose significant implications: (1) the demographic shifts toward 2040, when—in North America, at least—white individuals will constitute a minority of the population; (2) the shifting “center” of Christianity from the global North to the global South; and (3) the rapid growth of immigrant churches in North America in the last 20 years. These three historical developments may even shape the future of ATS itself.

In the past five years, ATS staff and other ATS-related individuals have been involved in conversations, resource sharing, and cooperative programming with international partners, some hosted at ATS and some convened abroad: the Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA), the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (FTESEA), the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI), the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE), and the Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE). More important, perhaps, is the engagement of many of our member schools in global work.

Q: How many schools are already engaged globally?

A: I would say that more than two-thirds of ATS member schools are engaged “beyond their borders” in one way or another, some more than others. The commitment is shared across all of the ecclesial families of ATS, engaging both mainline and evangelical Protestant as well as Roman Catholic member schools.

For many ATS member schools, global awareness and engagement is built directly into the history, mission, and ethos of their institutions—because of the worldwide

character of their ecclesial families, their missionary or evangelistic orientation, or their geographical location and composition of their faculty and/or student populations.

Many schools have collaborative degree programs with partner institutions in the “majority world” through extension education, distance learning, or global consortia. Others have faculty exchanges involving short-term teaching and/or research. Still others have intercultural and contextual programs—some for credit and some not—such as travel seminars, immersion and contextualization programs, and “missionary” initiatives. Some have established centers directly related to global awareness and engagement. Some have courses or entire degree programs in Spanish, Mandarin, or Korean. And of course many ATS schools have extension sites in locations such as Germany, the Ukraine, Indonesia, Guatemala, and Thailand.

Q: What does the membership stand to gain from this commitment?

A: ATS member schools can be found along a continuum from intense global engagement to studied indifference. So while the benefits are many, they are not going to be the same or uniform for each school. That said, I can see that global awareness and engagement offers the opportunity to deepen and broaden member schools’ understanding of their place in the world. It offers a means for schools to share their expertise within the Association and the Commission. And it offers occasions for fellowship and learning. Global awareness and engagement offers the possibility for member schools to exercise their mission “beyond their borders.”

Q: What are some of the key challenges in this work, and how may they best be addressed?

A: There are a number of broad challenges that require attention. First, there are definitional and substantive challenges: How should globalization and theological education be understood and linked, given the contested

and uneven experiences of globalization? What constitutes an adequate theology and ministry for a globalizing world, particularly in relation to historic faith and practice? How should “effective global partnerships” be defined and by what measures and criteria are they to be assessed?

Second, there are political and institutional push-and-pull challenges: (1) “brain drain” (for the global South), vis-à-vis “brain gain” (for the global North); (2) the need to develop self-sufficient, indigenous leadership vis-à-vis mission-driven commitments for resource sharing; (3) strong denominational missionary commitments vis-à-vis a recognition of the need for the affirmation of the non-Christian “Other”; (4) the perception of North American power and privilege and agendas vis-à-vis the ethical and moral imperative for hospitality and mutual accountability in an asymmetrical world; and (5) the singular accountability of North American theological education vis-à-vis theological education elsewhere in the world.

Third, there are educational and pedagogical challenges: (1) the dominance of English in terms of learning, teaching, and research; (2) the very real differences among cultures leading to different understandings of theology and pedagogy (e.g., oral versus reading/writing cultures); and (3) the growth of new delivery systems and models of education and mission.

Fourth, there are programmatic challenges related to educational initiatives, whether degree-granting or not, with member schools that have international extension sites.

Fifth, there are the personal, emotional, and spiritual challenges that are part of how our identities are formed and how we exercise our missional, evangelical, and justice commitments in a world complicated by the unevenness/differences of our respective contexts. Global awareness and engagement is not only about values, aspirations, policies, or programs. It is about partnerships and relationships that require of us to live well “together.”

Q: How will this be guided and integrated with the rest of the work of the Association?

A: During the next two years of the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative, we hope to build on previous ATS-sponsored globalization consultations, on the work done in the Educational Models and Practices project, and on the work of ATS staff with partners around the world (e.g., GFTE, WOCATI, ATESEA, ICETE, FTESEA). The expectation is that ATS will bridge its efforts of the past ten years with its goals for the next two, possibly the next five, which will include cultivating global strategic relationships, wider participation of ATS staff in the programmatic aspects of the initiative, and developing long-term institutional support from multiple sources. We hope to better define what characterizes effective global partnerships, to cultivate strategic relationships with global partners, and to strengthen our program staff in this area.

Q: How can member schools get involved in this initiative? What can they contribute?

A: There is so much that member schools can contribute—and have already contributed. Plans are being made to create a communications structure (email, webinars, etc.), as funding is available, to share the work of the initiative and to open avenues by which schools and individuals can contribute.

The initiative is committed over the next two years to the creation of a core of approximately 20 individuals, drawn primarily from ATS member schools that have participated in the previous ATS-sponsored globalization consultations, as well as from the global partnership peer groups of the Educational Models Project. This volunteer work group, currently being formed, will engage in discussion, research, consulting the wider ATS membership, and writing around the theme of “effective global partnerships,” paying particular attention to pursuing further, and building on the substantive work of the peer groups

on global partnerships, as well as the prior work of global awareness and engagement conducted by ATS.

The work group will produce a consolidated, more formalized document containing a set of guidelines and recommendations for member schools, which hopefully will be submitted to the board for approval as a membership resource guide for effective global partnerships.

Q: How do you see the relationship between your current work in accrediting and this additional work in global engagement?

A: There is a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between accreditation and global engagement, built on

the relationships forged with individuals and member schools over time. Accreditation as a “grand diagnostic” is a source of information and inspiration, and it will continue to fuel and orient this work to ensure quality assurance and improvement in theological education. The global engagement initiative, in turn, is a normative sightline and ethos that will continue to shape the work of accrediting.



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