

Get to know Mary Young— An interview with the new director of leadership education



Mary Young joined the staff of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) on June 1, to head leadership education programming for theological school administrators as well as programs for

Women in Leadership and the Committee on Race and Ethnicity. She comes to the Association after 23 years in service to Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. Three weeks in, Mary spoke to us about her new role.

How does your new position fit with your calling?

I do consider this position to be an extension of my “calling” to both the church and the academy. As an educator, my passions have been teaching, leading, equipping, and motivating others in both of these contexts. Throughout my life, I have been blessed to see the convergence of these passions manifested in varied occupations and ministry positions. The nature of “call” presupposes our openness to the will and purpose of God for our lives. While we cannot always determine the exact plan God has for us, we know when we are in that plan. Accepting the position of director, leadership education was a response to a “call”—a call to use

the arsenal of knowledge, experiences, gifts, talents, and abilities I have to the good of theological education. More than that, it was a “call” to say “yes” to the ways my life and ministry can be used to the glory of God and God’s people.

You’ve been an associate dean, a director of an MA program, an assistant professor of Christian education, a pastor, a math teacher, and more. What particular strengths do you bring from those contexts to this work?

It is my conviction that every experience we have in life prepares us for the next chapter of our lives. The plethora of experiences I’ve had in academia have served to equip me for my current work at ATS. As an associate dean, I gained an up-close perspective on the teaching, learning, and scholarly task of theological institutions. More specifically, I gained the perspective of what it looks like at an historically black seminary. Working with the dean and the faculty in matters related to curriculum development, educational assessment, institutional effectiveness, and program evaluation equipped me to understand the administrative functions in the life of a seminary. I brought to the academy a skillset that allowed me to make meaningful contributions. Having been trained as a computer programmer with significant experiences in data collection, coding, and analysis, it was first nature for me to feel comfortable with the technical and more data-driven functions at the seminary. This catalogue of expertise will also serve me well here at ATS.

As a pastor, I worked with groups, organizations, and individual people to make visions become realities. Pastoral ministry not only fed my spirit but also created the awesome opportunity for me to feed the spirits of others. I felt honored to have the opportunity to care for others

and lead them to places of faith, commitment, and action. Engaging in the call to and the challenge of pastoral ministry allowed me to see the hand of the Divine in work that has eternal implications.

In many ways, I see my work at ATS as having eternal implications as well. I will work with committees, groups, and individuals to provide the most impactful and relevant training and educational programs possible, realizing that individuals who will benefit from such programming also serve as partners with God in a larger plan of preparing persons for the work of ministry. The ability to cast a vision, work with and care for partners participating in the vision, provide practical strategies for achieving the vision, and trust a power beyond the vision is at the core of what I bring to my work at ATS.

These varied experiences allow me to bring strengths in program development and evaluation, budget management, creative curricular and pedagogical designs, ministry care and counseling, strong intrapersonal skills, and healthy teamwork strategies to my work as director, leadership education.

You bring a fresh eye to the work of leadership education. Do you have any initial observations about current programming? Are there any new approaches you look forward to exploring?

While I am still learning about the variety of leadership initiatives offered through our Programs and Services work here at ATS, I am eager to provide more opportunities to deliver training to persons who are unable to attend events. Today's technology opens up a number of opportunities for creative delivery of content and archival of training designs. I also envision frequent "state of the industry" presentations that link our work across the various training programs and ensure a comprehensive view of theological school administration.

You previously served on the ATS Task Force on Educational Technology. How do you see recent advances in technology—as well as those you might anticipate in the future—impacting the work of leadership education?

Over the last decade, technology has significantly changed the way we deliver theological coursework, as well as how we provide training events sponsored through webinars and how we connect people through Zoom meetings, Skype, and other forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication. Our schools now offer online courses, programs, and fully-online degrees and are giving careful attention to the evaluation of student learning through distance education. I envision these advances in technology and others enhancing the current work being done in leadership education. Technology will

permit us to create a data-bank of training resources available for personnel at our schools. Through appropriate technology, we will be able to broaden the scope of our programs, having greater impact among our schools.

How do you anticipate that your past involvement as a member of the Board of Commissioners, in particular, will inform your work in leadership education?

Having served on the Board of Commissioners, I have a broad view of the diversity that exists among our schools in confessional commitment, missional declaration, degree offerings, student constituencies, faculty composition, and many other factors. Our schools are both creatively innovative and significantly challenged. They weather the storms of change and transition, making informed and faithful decisions about how they will continue in the call to prepare persons to serve the church and the world. It is this knowledge of and sensitivity to our schools that forms a sound foundation upon which I envision programming that equips seminary leaders for

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the work they must do. The work of leadership education will keep an eye toward the changing theological landscape and the emerging training needs of leaders in our schools in an effort to remain relevant, creative, and responsive.

What has been the most surprising thing about Pittsburgh?

I was surprised to find out that the “city of bridges” can actually boast of some 446 bridges, based on a 2006 study. As I drive around the area, I am also surprised at the catalogue of small townships and municipalities that surround the city proper. A different township might be just a couple of miles away from one’s current location. Of course, there is also Interstate 376 that has east and west directions. On 376, I find it less confusing to simply determine if I need to head in the direction of downtown Pittsburgh or if I need to head in the direction of the airport!

Please welcome Mary as she learns to navigate her new position at ATS as well as her newly adopted city. She can be reached at young@ats.edu
-Ed.