

It takes two to tango—development and communications in major transitions

BY NED ALLYN PARKER
AND JAMES HACKNEY

During the 2019 ATS Development Officers' Conference, ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada shared that at least 29 ATS member freestanding seminaries and theological schools were considering or already amid major transitions. These transitions included examples of schools merging or partnering with other, larger university systems. Other examples included schools completely re-envisioning how to provide the best resources to their students—whether these resources are offered online or in a scaled-down setting. All too often, presentations about partnerships and mergers are only offered by a lone representative of a single school. We, the authors, believe presentations like these should include voices from both institutions. Together, we set out to reflect on the accomplishments of Andover Newton Theological School's transition from a freestanding theological school to an embedded seminary.

Because a variety of articles are available that outline the nature and progression of this particular transition, we will skip the historical narrative and move straight into the discrete learning opportunities that arose within the larger context of the move. Therefore, this article will



focus on (1) the core values of development and communications adopted by Andover Newton during the transition; (2) the challenges—potential and actual—and how we worked together to avoid and/or address them; and (3) a brief reflection on why we believe we achieved success.

In order to communicate most effectively, both about the transition and about the need to continue fundraising, the Office of Development and Communications at Andover Newton adopted six core values to help guide the institution's development efforts, while further educating constituents about the nature of the transition itself.

VALUES

1 *Communicating clearly about need*

There has been a common misconception that because Andover Newton is now embedded within a university system, fiscal need is a thing of the past. It continues to be imperative to be educative about our fundraising efforts and how budgeting works in our new home.

2 Adopting a faithful devotion to gratitude

There is a quote attributed to Meister Eckhart paraphrased here: “If the only prayer you ever say is thank you, it will be enough.” The expression of gratitude may never be so integral to the life of an organization as that moment when it is in transition. This is, as they say, the moment we learn who our friends are.

3 Nurturing transformational relationships, not transactional relationships

As an institution of faith, we are in the business of transformation. Students leave transformed by the education they receive, transformed by the academic rigor of the classroom, and transformed by the compassion and love of the community. This is how it should be in all relationships. Greater investment is cultivated when donors and partners recognize that they are both giving *and* receiving.

4 Embracing vulnerability as a symbol of sacred humility

Being transparent about vulnerability is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to bring friends and alumni/ae together, to ask them to get their hands dirty, to do the good work of building this beloved community in a new location. Within a loving and nurturing community, life always prevails.

5 Making accessibility a form of outreach

With a new website, an active social media presence, and a populated travel schedule, Andover Newton is sharpening its capacity for communications and outreach. These media offer opportunities to create and enhance networks of alumni/ae and partner churches.

6 Approaching development and communications as extensions of the ministry of the school of the church

In his book, *The Spirituality of Fundraising*, Henri Nouwen outlines the importance of approaching the work of development as a form of ministry—sacred stewardship.

Likewise, institutional communications become means by which we model the integrity, patience, joy, hope, and grace of ministry that is rooted in the good news of the gospels.

By drafting these core values, reflecting on them regularly, and sharing them with the Board of Trustees, we created a certain level of sacred accountability that guided and informed development and communications efforts during the course of this three-year transition.

In any significant transition such as this one, challenges are the reality. In part, we were able to address these challenges as they arose because we had adopted the values listed above. However, each challenge was unique and required its own examination, attention, and action.

While retaining a particular focus on development and communications, we highlight some specific and significant challenges that arose during transition.

CHALLENGES

1 The reality of the grieving process

Andover Newton Theological School rested on a beautiful hill just outside of Boston. While the school’s earliest campus was in Andover, Massachusetts, students had been studying in Newton since 1825. The collective memory of recent graduates rested in the physical surroundings, the buildings, and the quad of that campus. Knowing that seminarians would no longer study there was and continues to be a difficult reality for the alumni/ae population. When we talk about Andover Newton now, we talk about the living and extended community of *people*, not spaces.

2 Transfer of funds across state lines

When a nonprofit moves across state lines, the transfer of funds between states requires the approval of the state attorney general’s office. It is necessary for both institutions to retain legal representatives early in the process.

3 *Culture and institutional models*

When a relatively small and freestanding school partners with and then occupies a large university, the differences in institutional cultures become readily and quickly apparent. Open doors of communication are absolutely integral here. Additionally, the question that should be asked most frequently by the smaller institution is: “What parts of our institutional identity and culture are absolutely essential to who we are, and how do we ensure these are retained?”

4 *Migrating data—particularly alumni/ae and development data*

If a development system for managing records such as a Blackbaud product is used, then it is key to decide early how data will be transferred into and used within a new database system. The process of moving Andover Newton’s database, which had been housed in Raiser’s Edge, into Yale’s CRM system was nearly a nine-month process.

5 *Logistics such as branding, marketing, stewarding funds, and gift management*

These are the day-to-day aspects of the development and communications offices that require attention. Who will steward funds? Who will draft gift responses? Who will create new branding and marketing materials, and how will it be clear that the institutions are *partnered* and not instead that one institution has simply absorbed the other?

Going into these partnership conversations with a better sense of logistics such as these makes the communications between schools much more transparent and free-flowing. While it probably goes without saying, these conversations require openness and transparency from the beginning.

Finally, we consider why we believe this transition into partnership has worked so well. We use this phrase and acronym to speak in general terms about our experience of success: “Both schools were ready to A. C. T.”:

- **Alacrity** (readiness, eagerness). For *both* Andover Newton and Yale Divinity School, the time was right for a partnership.
- **Communication**. Both schools have been and continue to be very communicative. This was, of course, integral in the early stages of negotiations, but it continues to remain so as Andover Newton establishes its new institutional identity in New Haven.
- **Trust**. What partnership of this magnitude could thrive without trust? This has been a critical aspect of this transition and one worth naming time and again.

If your own institution is beginning to discern the steps toward a partnership, we hope these abbreviated highlights are helpful to your process. You may find that the core values of your office or institution may need adjustment as transition unfolds. There will certainly be challenges (many that we have failed to name in this short article). And, finally, it is important to define and establish what success means for both institutions as well as how you agree to work together toward that mutual success.

Based on our own experience of partnership, we are filled with hope for the future of theological education and how it will continue to impact the still-unfolding nature and identity of the church.



Ned Allyn Parker is Alumni/ae and Development Officer at Andover Newton Seminary in New Haven, Connecticut. At the time of this writing, James Hackney was serving as the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, and is the immediate past chair of the ATS Development Officers' Steering Committee.

