

New grant program kicks off with conversation groups

By *STEPHEN R. GRAHAM*

As a beginning step toward implementing the new ATS grant program, Organizational and Educational Models in Theological Education: Supporting the 21st Century Missions of Theological Schools, ATS invited two conversation groups—one in February and one in early March—to its Pittsburgh office. The groups offered input to form a broad picture of the issues with which the schools are wrestling related to organizational models and structures, finances and resource allocation, and business models.

Each gathering included chief executives, academic officers, financial officers, and student services personnel—representing the variety of ATS member schools—along with staff from ATS and In Trust Center for Theological Schools. The groups met to:

1. help ATS identify and clarify key issues concerning the realities, challenges, and opportunities facing theological schools today,
2. form a more holistic view of these issues based on input from various stakeholders,
3. identify the crucial questions ATS should address through this project, and
4. consider best approaches to help schools understand the interrelated character of organizational systems, structures, and strategies; and to ask crucial questions within their particular contexts.

A few key themes—shared from a variety of perspectives—emerged in the midst of spirited, insightful, and



creative conversations. In every school, in every context, some form or another of these themes must be engaged and addressed effectively . . .

- A foundational **Clarity of Mission** is essential for schools to take necessary steps to serve communities of faith and other constituencies now and in the future.
- Each school uses certain **Educational Models and Practices** to fulfill its mission, sometimes drawing on conventions of higher education as well as models of education and formation drawn from religious communities. Theological schools have traditionally been institutions oriented to both communities of faith and higher education.
- Each school serves students, utilizes people in oversight and administrative roles, facilitates the work of educators, and draws on the work of a range of people who support the work of the school. These **Personnel** enable the school to function and require leaders to reflect on who best can fulfill these roles and how best the institution can empower them.
- In accordance with the school's mission and ecclesial structures, patterns of **Governance** are necessarily in place that enable the institution to receive the best

input possible from those with particular areas of expertise, and have processes and patterns in place to make appropriate decisions based on that input.

- The institution must gather, steward, and expend its resources through effective **Organizational Structures and Financial Models** that most effectively use those resources in ways that make it both effective in the present and sustainable for the future.
- Each school uses **Facilities and Technologies** to pursue its mission. These vary dramatically, including across the schools represented in the February and March conversation groups. In each school, however, ownership, use, access, and sustainability in these areas must be measured regularly against fulfillment of the school's mission and adapted as necessary.

Through these conversations and previous discussions among the ATS staff, the different approaches used by member schools make it nearly impossible to define and present models that can be immediately applied to different contexts.

While the project will gather and analyze effective models for insights into problems and solutions, it is clear that a significant part of the *Organizational and Educational Models* project will be to help identify the fundamental questions that every school needs to address. Every school should (and many have been) address questions like: "Why does the school pursue its mission?" "What must the school do to fulfill its mission?" "Who are the people best equipped to do what the school needs to do?" and "How best to accomplish the mission?"

Another way of framing the conversations was to address four "big" questions posed as participants explored what a seminary might look like if "built from scratch." Within each, the conversation groups identified a number of exploratory questions.

Why do this? Clarity of Mission

During the conversation, one participant asked, "What good is theological education for?" Another wondered "What 'gifts' does theological education have to offer to the broader culture?" Every school has a distinctive purpose that should be reflected in its core mission. Each school should explore how its mission should be shaped by the needs of constituents and the needs of students.

Many schools have asked these questions but, in these circumstances, it might be best to ask them again. "If this school disappeared, who would miss it?" "What would *no longer* be done that needs to be done?"

What needs to be done to implement the mission? Educational models and practices

Once a school has clarified its mission, it must assess the means through which that mission is fulfilled. Schools use a variety of educational models and practices, but are they the best possible through which to fulfill that school's distinctive mission? North American theological schools have often used the structures and assumptions of broader higher education to shape their institutions (e.g., credit hour, tenure, particular class schedules, pedagogical methods, etc.). Which of those structures and assumptions should be used and which should not?

One way of exploring the distinctive contributions and processes of theological schools is to ask, "What is *theological* about theological education?" Is there a distinctive character that distinguishes theological schools from other institutions of higher education?

One participant asked, "What aspects of the educational work can *only* be done by the school?" Are there processes and functions best done through partner institutions?



ATS staff members Stephen Graham and Chris Meinzer listen to a participant's comment during the first conversation group gathering in February.

Finally, what is the appropriate balance among dimensions of student formation—intellectual, vocational, human, and spiritual? And do the educational models and practices of the school achieve that balance?

Who is best equipped to do it?

Administrators, faculty, staff, board

One of the largest challenges facing theological schools is related to personnel—administrators, faculty, staff, and boards. Questions related to these groups of personnel that emerged through the conversations included:

Administrators

- How do schools hire and empower courageous, creative leaders?
- What administrative roles are truly essential?
- How do schools best overcome historic divisions (e.g., faculty vs. administrators)?

Faculty

- What is the best preparation for faculty to serve in present and future theological schools? One participant spoke about the “ideal of faculty who are interdisciplinary *and* who have depth in one discipline.”
- How do schools develop faculty in the midst of change, loss, and lament?

Staff

- What roles are essential to support the school’s mission?
- How might schools develop more collaborative models that bring more people to the decision-making table?

Board

- How to shape a board to best support the school’s mission?
- How to employ a board for greatest effectiveness?

How is this endeavor best accomplished? Governance, organizational structures and financial models, facilities, and technologies

The participants in each meeting spent considerable time discussing and debating issues of governance. In almost every school represented in the meetings, there were questions about what “shared governance” actually means in practice. Might better language be “collaborative governance?” What are the school’s present structures of authority? What can change and what cannot? How, exactly, is power exercised in the school? By whom? What are formal and informal roles and power? Does the school have “taker-downers” who are able to undermine ideas and strategies?

Participants, whose schools represented a range of structures and processes, discussed “flat” dynamic structures in contrast to more hierarchical and static structures. What governance structures support and allow the exercise of courageous, creative leadership?

Conversations also explored the relationship between institutional financial health and the financial health of personnel, including students. One participant wondered, given the differences in programs and their financial models, who is *actually* paying the cost of theological education? The participants agreed that the school’s financial model must be fully aligned with its mission.

Finally, participants reflected on what facilities and technologies are necessary to support the school’s work and its particular approach to theological education.

These broad ranging conversations provided an important beginning and key focus areas for the Association’s *Organizational and Educational Models* project. Stay tuned for the next steps in addressing these issues and questions.



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