

# ATS student services personnel are challenged and empowered at conference

BY MARY H. YOUNG

*More than 120 student services personnel from ATS member schools gathered for an annual meeting earlier this month in Newport Beach, California. Guided by the theme “New Practices for Changing Times: Retooling for Student and Institutional Success,” the conference included three plenary sessions, 15 workshops, a profession-based networking reception, and varied opportunities for collegial sharing in communities of conversation.*

The conference opened with an engaging plenary session by David C. Wang, associate professor of psychology and pastoral counseling at Biola University, who spoke about spiritual formation among seminary students, addressing both the challenges in assessment and recent developments in research related to spiritual formation. He asked participants to reflect on how they are measuring student spiritual formation by reflecting on two questions he asked of his own research team—“If your institution were to use an assessment tool to track the spiritual life and character change of students, what are the things that must be included?” and “What observable qualities or indicators point to the reality that formation has occurred in your students (e.g., virtues, practices, behaviors)?”

Wang drew the participants into thinking deeply and critically about matters related to spiritual formation through small group discussions.



Participants discuss challenges and recent developments in the assessment of spiritual formation among seminary students during David Wang's opening plenary.

“The real world problem (i.e., how to accurately/robustly assess the spiritual and character development of seminary students) provides a unique opportunity for theologians/philosophers and psychologists to work together,” he said.

The changing roles of student services personnel was the focus of a second plenary, moderated by Jo Ann Reinowski, director of academic services at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University and chair of the event's steering committee. Five other leaders from a variety of schools served as members of the panel and shared their experiences with managing multiple functions in their work in order to ensure student and institutional success. Several panelists spoke of the need to clear papers from their desks at the end of each day as a way of facing the next day with a clean slate—signaling a new beginning, even to complete “unfinished” tasks.

Speaking to the need for longitudinal practices related to the financial needs of students, the third plenary of the conference was titled “Integrating Mission and Money: Addressing Finances with Students before, during, and after Theological Education.” ATS Director of Institutional

Initiatives and Student Research Jo Ann Deasy facilitated a conversation with panelists from three member schools who talked about how they help students to monitor their debt levels from pre-admission to graduation.

One participant tweeted “It’s helpful to create speed bumps such as required counseling about debt for students as they move through seminary.”

Workshop sessions covered a wide range of topics from recruitment, formation, self-care, and student advising to leading amid change, managing Title IX requirements, and building institutional support for graduate student mental health. Several attendees named plenaries and workshops as instrumental in providing “resources, ideas, and practices” that they can take back to their institutions.

Following the pattern of other ATS administrator group conferences this year, a focus group session of invited student services personnel was held to gather their insights and reflections regarding the redevelopment of the ATS Standards of Accreditation. Members of the group identified ways that the language of the standards could support the success and flourishing of students at every level of the institution.

The conference concluded with professional conversations on “hot topics” related to the work of student

services personnel. Participants were grouped for roundtable discussions by affinity associations that included embedded schools, freestanding schools, Roman Catholic schools, and Canadian Schools, among others.

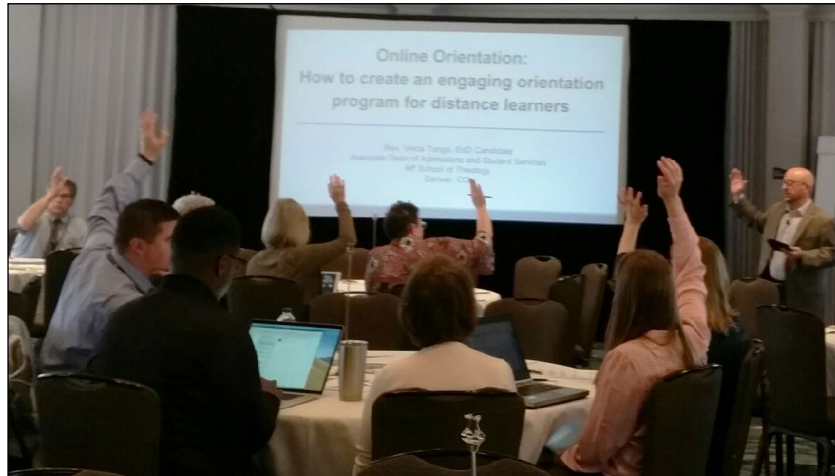
Ideas mentioned in the conversations included suggestions for keeping students engaged in seminary community as more students are bivocational, online, and non-residential learners; caring for the needs of female-identifying students in the cultural climate of #metoo

and #timesup; dealing with intercultural and institutional racism matters while serving domestic and international minority students; and managing the impact of institutional restructuring on student personnel morale.

When asked what aspects of the conference were most

beneficial, one attendee said “Talking with and hearing from peers at other seminaries about their experiences with enrollment management processes and other ways of improving student contact.”

Several participants named “networking,” “gaining a broader perspective of theological education outside my school,” and “professional development” as their top priorities for attending the event.



Vince Tango leads a workshop on how to create an engaging orientation program for distance learners.



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