

Teaching online in the age of COVID-19: three findings from ATS survey

By TOM TANNER

“What will theological education look like post-pandemic?” “What will the ‘new normal’ be in terms of teaching and learning?” So asked two seminary leaders replying to a mid-April survey of all ATS deans and presidents regarding the COVID-19 crisis. The survey’s 86% response rate is astonishingly high, given these difficult days, and indicates how willing ATS leaders are to share what they are learning and how anxious they are to learn what other ATS schools are doing to address a pandemic unparalleled in our lifetimes. This article, one of a series sharing results from that ATS survey (see [“How ATS schools are responding to COVID-19 crisis”](#)), focuses on teaching online in the age of COVID-19—with three findings.

1 Most ATS schools were prepared to pivot online

Perhaps one of the more surprising results from this survey is how well prepared most ATS schools were to pivot online. When asked what *immediate actions* they took to address this emergency, the most frequently cited—by more than 90% of ATS deans and presidents—was “switched all courses online or remote delivery” (ranking a close second was “asked faculty to work from home”). When asked, though, what their most *immediate challenges* at the outset were, they ranked “finding



ways to offer classes remotely” only sixth. That was cited by less than half the deans and only one-third of the presidents; ranking first and second by both groups were “changing commencement” and “caring for students” (see [“How do you do commencement when you can’t gather?”](#)).

One reason why most ATS schools may have found it less challenging to offer classes remotely is that nearly three-fourths of all ATS schools already offer online courses, with half of those offering degrees entirely online. In addition, almost half (44%) of all ATS students had taken at least one course online before the crisis, according to the fall 2019 ATS Annual Report Forms. Nearly three-fourths of all ATS schools reported last fall that they were using an online learning management system (LMS), with the most popular being Moodle (60 schools) and Canvas (59 schools); Blackboard (20 schools) and Populi (19 schools) were a distant third and fourth. The widespread use of learning management systems among ATS schools may help explain why no survey respondent indicated

they purchased an LMS to address this crisis (of course, cost is likely another factor). Only 8% indicated they had to implement “emergency training” for their faculty to use an LMS, though nearly half had to do that for Zoom (see next section). Teaching and learning online has become part and parcel of how *most* ATS schools operate—before “Coronavirus” became a common term and an uncommon crisis. As one dean put it, echoing many, “we were ready.”

2 **Online learning differs from emergency remote teaching**

Since this crisis began, many in higher education have commented on what Educause called “the difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning.” Those who regularly teach online understand that online learning requires significant preparation, careful design, and substantial support. ATS faculty and students also understand that online learning has been—until now—mostly voluntary. That all changed with COVID-19. Suddenly, faculty and students alike found themselves forced overnight into online courses—without any choice or any chance for significant preparation—amidst all the other challenges this crisis has brought. As one dean stated so succinctly and so sadly: “we are dealing with faculty who are experiencing trauma educating students who are experiencing trauma who are engaged in ministry contexts that are experiencing trauma.” Emergency indeed. We all became M*A*S*H units.

So, while most ATS schools were prepared to pivot online, no one had planned to do that—not within a few days with every course and every student and every faculty member. Voluntary online learning *for some* quickly became emergency remote delivery *for everyone else*. Nearly 90% of survey respondents indicated that their platform of choice for meeting that emergency was Zoom, with courses delivered either “mostly synchronously” (52%) or “about half synchronously and half asynchronously” (35%). Spending months preparing a well-designed online course is just not the same as switching a well-designed on-campus course to an online

Zoom course in the middle of a semester in the middle of a crisis. That helps explain why so many schools (43%) indicated they had to implement “emergency training for their synchronous platform.” And moving so many things so suddenly to Zoom may help account for this ATS dean’s lament: “we are all tired of looking at screens.”

“Face-to-face residential education remains our priority . . . the fully-online mode we are using for this emergency is not seen as a serious option for pastoral formation.” While several deans responded along those lines, it would be well to keep in mind that much of what ATS schools are doing during this crisis is M*A*S*H emergency triage, not necessarily long-term care—and the effects of this crisis may be long-term. Nearly 90% of the deans in this mid-April survey said their *summer* courses would either be online (74%) or they were seriously considering that option (15%)—and a fourth of those have had no experience in online education before this crisis. Another two-thirds responded that their *fall* courses would either be online (19%) or they were seriously considering that option (46%)—and a fourth of those have also had no online experience before this crisis. It is not surprising then that ATS deans cited “how to teach remotely beyond this spring” as their *second highest long-term concern* (after worries over fall enrollment). While that concern was cited by 63% of all deans, the disparity between schools experienced in online education and those not experienced is quite distinct, with 56% of the former citing this concern, but 80% of the latter.

3 **We are all tied together and help one another**

This dean’s response is indicative of many others: “All ATS schools are tied together and [will] help one another overcome this pandemic with the leadership of ATS.” Presidents and deans cited over and over again the resiliency and adaptability of their people and their creativity amidst this crisis. As one stated: “we have more appetite and capacity for innovation than previously observed.” Said another, “great people pull together in hard times.” And yet a third said that they now “realize the remarkable

capacity for change that we have: transitioning to online within 24 hours, which I wouldn't have thought possible." To be sure, the ongoing challenges seem enormous, with one asking rather plaintively, "When will this end?"

Several survey respondents asked how ATS could help in this crisis, especially in the pivot to online and what that might mean long-term, as well as how theological education might adapt "post-pandemic." The ATS Board of Directors and the ATS Board of Commissioners, along with ATS staff, have had numerous and lengthy conversations about that in recent weeks, with results to be shared in future *Colloquy Online* articles. One timely response that ATS began pre-pandemic was noted by this dean: "I think the revision of the *ATS Standards* is very timely and appropriate." The membership will vote on the new *Standards* at the June 2020 Biennial Meeting—ironically now a Zoom meeting due to this crisis. This year's theme—echoing key foci of the new *Standards*—seems especially timely and appropriate: *Quality. Clarity. Flexibility. Re-envisioning Theological Education for a New Generation*. Those words seem to resonate now even more "in

the age of COVID-19," with ATS leaders noting in their survey responses the need to be "flexible," "adaptable," and "nimble." More than a few also noted the need to "be clear about one's mission" in these difficult days and to "concentrate on core concerns."

In short, this survey reveals that ATS leaders are looking anew, not at screens, but at their missions and how they can offer quality theological education in whatever ways that requires in this new, "novel coronavirus" age. A new set of standards—focused on quality, clarity, and flexibility—may help schools answer the questions from ATS leaders that began this article: "What will theological education look like post-pandemic?" "What will the 'new normal' be in terms of teaching and learning?" One dean said one of the most important lessons she has learned in this crisis is this: "We're not in control!" But we know One who is. In these days of social distancing, perhaps we might ponder anew these words from Jeremiah 23:23, "Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away?"



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