

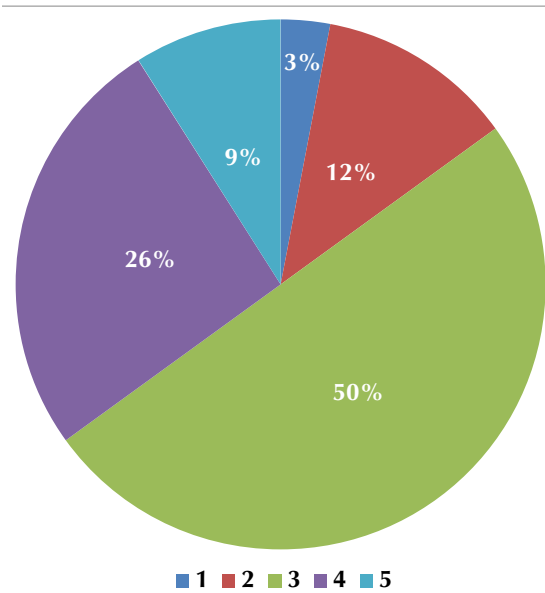
Changes in faculty work

By Stephen R. Graham

It comes as no surprise to anyone reading this magazine that over the past two decades the work of faculty in theological schools has changed. The most noted and most obvious changes have to do with advances in technology that impact communication, educational methods and formats, and scholarly research. But the changes are more numerous and sweeping than just technological developments. Theological schools are institutions of higher education, and the world of higher education has changed dramatically in recent years. Many of the cues for change in theological schools have come from the larger world of higher education. For instance, the move toward ever-greater specialization in doctoral work has affected both chemists and theologians, scholars of literature as well as those who study and teach pastoral care. And then there is committee work. Ever a bane of faculty members, administrative work, including serving on committees, directing degree programs, and a wide variety of other tasks, has been increasing across higher education.

FIGURE 1. Faculty openness to online teaching

1 = Online technologies have no place in theological education
5 = Fully online MDivs should be offered



Adding to the pressure have been significant changes in the other shaping force for theological schools: the church they exist to serve. For many, their denominations no longer are able to provide the supply of students, financial support, and place of service for graduates that the schools once could assume. For others, constituents increasingly demand shorter, less expensive, more accessible forms of education—while students frequently come to their graduate theological study with less traditional academic preparation and less ecclesial experience upon which to draw.

Changes in higher education and the church inevitably challenge theological schools. As Daniel Aleshire puts it in his study of theological schools, *Earthen Vessels*, “Theological schools are hybrid institutions. They are intimately and irrevocably related both to the work of the church and to the patterns and practices of higher education.” Significantly, “This is an era of unrest in both partners.”

The challenges and changes affect all aspects and constituencies of schools but, perhaps, most thoroughly the faculty. Speaking about the higher education community in general in their magisterial study, *The American Faculty*, Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein declare “We take as our point of departure a bold and unqualified assertion: American higher education and the academic profession that serve it are on the edge of an unprecedented restructuring that is changing the face—indeed, even the very meaning—of higher learning.”

Member schools of ATS must take these challenges seriously and prepare for changes that will impact faculty work for decades to come. To that end, ATS has conducted a survey of member school faculties followed by a focused consultation to discuss changes in their work.

The survey

This past winter ATS surveyed faculty members who have been involved in ATS projects or grant programs over the past few years. A total of 370 faculty members received the survey and 192

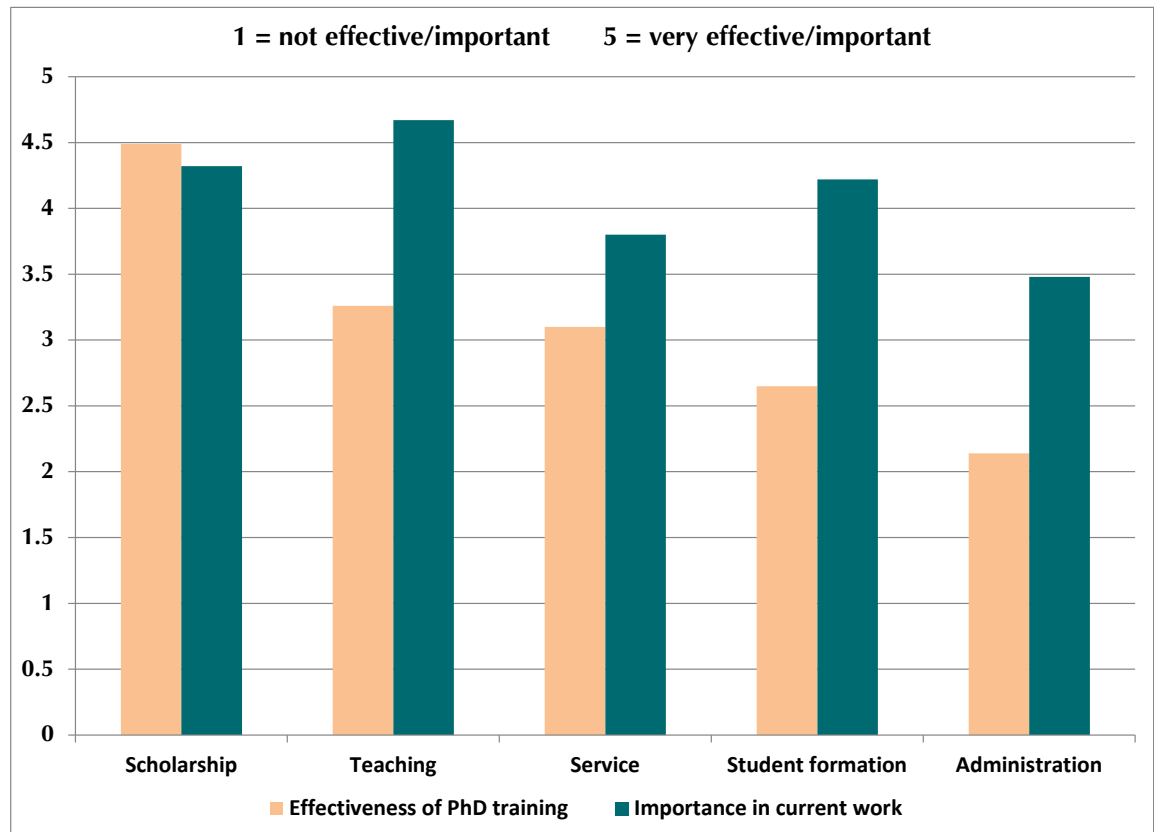
submitted responses. Both the survey and the consultation that followed revealed important assumptions and attitudes among faculty members in theological schools.

When asked to identify changes in their work, faculty respondents named two changes as most significant: the growth in administrative responsibilities and the impact of educational technology. *Administrative* was a term used generally to identify work on committees, program oversight, work related to accreditation, and responsibilities not directly related to the more normal work of teaching and research. Educational technology included developments in online teaching and increased use of electronic technology in class, research, and communication. When asked how important online technologies *should* be in theological education, 2010 respondents (shown in Figure 1) suggested a slightly greater openness to online teaching and learning than did responses to a similar question in 2003 to which faculty participants were described as “negative to cautiously optimistic” about the potential of distance education.

It is interesting and perhaps revealing that very few respondents named changes in the church as having an important direct impact on their work.

When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their doctoral training for their current work as faculty members in theological schools, responses revealed significant gaps. Figure 2 demonstrates the comparison between PhD training and current work responsibilities for the respondents. While it could be argued that it is not the responsibility nor the expertise of doctoral programs to prepare their students in all of these areas and that students develop them in other contexts, the need for faculty development in a number of areas is clear.

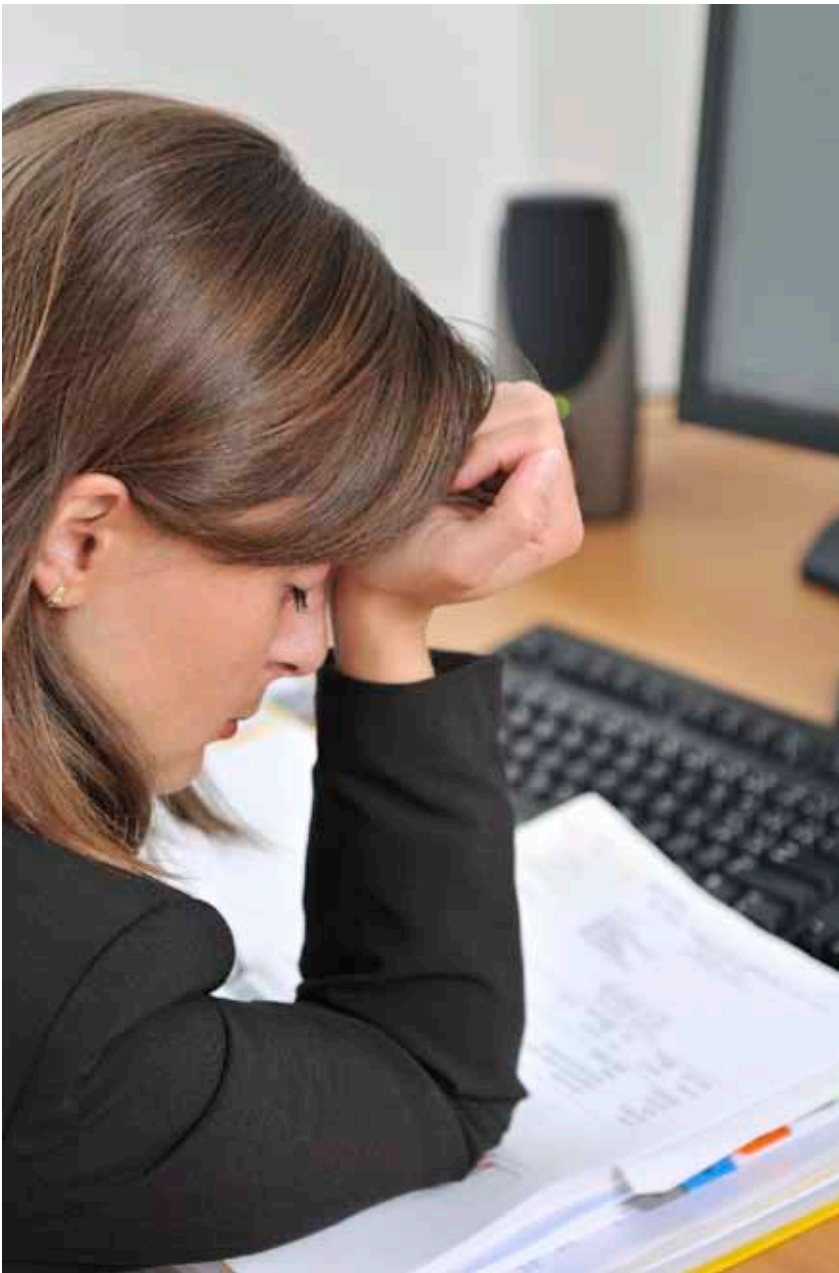
FIGURE 2. Comparison of PhD training and current work responsibilities



Not surprisingly, the most effective area of doctoral training was “scholarship.” It is the only category that was deemed to be a bit less crucial to faculty work compared to the effectiveness of training. In contrast, faculty expressed a notable lack of effectiveness in training for what they viewed as the crucial work of teaching, service, student formation, and administration.

Respondents were also asked to prioritize five areas of their work. Some resisted, arguing that the survey forced them to make choices between areas that they wanted to rank equally. Nevertheless, overall patterns emerged. Not surprisingly, students were named as the highest priority. Somewhat lower and nearly equal were serving the school’s mission and the church. The respondents’ academic guild was substantially lower in fourth place, and service to the public beyond church and guild came in a distant fifth. (See Table 1 on page 41.)

An interesting exercise would be for schools to compare this list of priorities with the policies and practices of their respective schools as well as the requirements for promotion and tenure. Participants in the consultation spoke of work



of reasons, off-the-grid work may fall most heavily on female, racial/ethnic, and junior faculty.

The challenge of learning the work actually required of theological school faculty members that is not addressed by their formal training was one issue. Simply finding a job was another. According to ATS data, the number of new hires within member schools declined dramatically between fall 2008 and fall 2010, in large part due to the economic downturn. In 2008 there were 420 persons in that category. In 2009 the number declined to 339, and by the fall of 2010, the number of new hires had fallen to 226. While this number will likely increase modestly in coming years as schools experience some financial recovery, higher education experts suggest that smaller faculties and leaner institutions are the “new normal.” The impact on theological schools is acute since, in their efforts to sustain the prevailing financial and educational models, most schools were small and lean before the downturn.

The consultation

In March 2011, ATS hosted a focused consultation of thirty-six faculty members to discuss changes in their work. For a day prior to the larger gathering, nineteen female faculty members discussed how recent changes impacted their work and the challenges and opportunities that the changes brought to them. Nominated by their deans, participants were selected to represent the wide spectrum of ecclesial families and the types of schools within the Association, as well as on the basis of what they could bring to the consultation from their experience and expertise. Panels of participants offered reflections and prompted larger conversations about the change of focus from faculty teaching to student learning, the impact of developments in educational technology, changes in faculty culture, and how changes in the church have affected faculty work.

From faculty teaching to student learning

One of the most perplexing issues for faculty in theological schools is the growing emphasis on outcomes assessment of student learning. The shift has been described as a move from a focus on the quality of faculty teaching to a measurement of what students have learned. How do we know that we are effective? There is an immediate application of the concept of stewardship and the duty to be responsible and faithful to fulfill the missions theological schools have set for themselves. Schools have always done assessment of student learning, but recent

Participants in the consultation spoke of work that is “off the grid,” that is, work that is essential (they hope!) for the school’s mission but that doesn’t fit neatly—or at all—into the grid of work that is recognized and rewarded. Participants also voiced the concern that, for a variety of reasons, off-the-grid work may fall most heavily on female, racial/ethnic, and junior faculty.

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TABLE 1. Faculty Work Survey: Priority

1 = Most Important	5 = Least Important
Average	
Students	1.87
School Mission	2.65
Church	2.74
Academic Guild	3.23
Public	4.48

requirements ask for measurement, documentation, and clarification.

Faculty at the consultation wrestled with issues of time and work load associated with assessment as well as philosophical issues such as concerns about “over assessment,” the rigidity of rubrics vs. the flexibility sometimes needed in classes, the possibility of “drowning in a sea of data,” and the difficulty of assessing areas such as character and spiritual formation.

In the midst of these serious and important questions, however, participants noted the excellent work in assessment being done in many places; the benefits of including collaborators, such as recent graduates and others in ministry; and greater clarity of mission that have come from this work. In addition, participants called for attention to

- ♦ *theological* reflection on assessment;
- ♦ work on assessment of student formation;
- ♦ assessment as “outcome guided vs. outcome driven;”
- ♦ work on assessment of learning that utilizes educational technology;
- ♦ “staging” of assessment with markers along the way, so it all doesn’t have to happen at the end; and
- ♦ developing a “culture of assessment.”

Assessment of student learning outcomes is here to stay, and faculty will play a crucial role in shaping it to be effective and also to fit the distinctive character of theological education.

The impact of educational technology

Like assessment of student learning, changes driven by educational technology will be part of the fabric of theological education for the foreseeable future, with workload issues at the forefront of faculty concern. There is no escaping the fact that advances in educational technology, while including aspects of time

and labor savings, also require time, work, and institutional resources to learn and utilize them effectively. There is great benefit from wrestling with the pedagogical issues involved, but there is no getting around the fact that it is a *lot* of work. Schools need to develop ways to support and compensate faculty for this work.

According to those at the consultation, the most important payoff for that expenditure of resources is greater access, particularly access by students who would not otherwise benefit from formal theological education.

Nearer the heart of the mission of theological schools, though, they named the key question of assuring and assessing student formation (in all its facets) when face-to-face time is reduced or eliminated. How are students formed and how do schools assess student learning and formation when significant portions of their work is done away from the campus? New models and ways of thinking are needed.

Participants also made the following recommendations for schools:

- ♦ Avoid placing the burden of being the “tech person” on a faculty member who is leading the way in utilizing educational technology (at least don’t do it without appropriate compensation).
- ♦ Recognize, on the other hand, that knowledge of educational technology is a very valuable and career-enhancing skill.
- ♦ Recognize for coming generations, as one panelist put it, that social media serve as the “amniotic fluid” in which they have been shaped.
- ♦ Attend to intellectual property, security, and boundary issues related to online teaching.
- ♦ Be alert both to possibilities *and* limits of technologies.
- ♦ Develop ways for faculties to discuss issues of access and exclusion. Who gains access? What persons or groups are excluded?

As educational technologies develop and are incorporated into theological education, it is crucial that faculty members become engaged in the discussions and provide leadership toward utilizing those technologies with effectiveness and faithfulness to the missions of schools and the needs of the church.

Changes in faculty culture

Especially in response to recent financial challenges in higher education, forces of change are at work that call into question long-accepted assumptions about education and faculty culture. As schools have eliminated staff positions

and otherwise cut benefits, programs, and budgets, aspects of faculty life and work have come under question. Tenure, sabbatical leave, moderate teaching loads, and traditional academic calendars, just to name a few items, have faced scrutiny. At the same time, especially in small theological schools, faculty members have taken on duties that had been handled by staff that the institutions can no longer afford to employ.

One change currently sweeping higher education that does not appear to be having an impact on theological schools, at least for now, is a rapid decline in tenured and tenure-track faculty and a corresponding growth in “contract” full-time faculty, adjuncts, and part-time faculty. Somewhat remarkably, the percentage of full-time faculty who were tenured or on a tenure-track faculty in ATS schools has remained constant at about 65 percent for the past twenty years. This is in sharp contrast to large declines in that percentage across higher education and rapid growth in the number of part-time faculty as well as categories of full-time faculty who are not tenured or on the tenure track.

While theological schools have avoided this trend in higher education, financial and other pressures might force the issue for theological schools. It is important to consider the possible impact of schools moving away from tenure or other traditional assumptions of faculty life and work.

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A related question that emerged in the consultation was the changing definition of *the faculty*. Many spoke of larger, more diverse groups around the faculty table. For example, some institutions have begun hiring and including in the faculty persons who also serve in administrative capacities, such as deans of students, financial officers, and program directors. Participants raised questions about the implications of this trend for academic policies and processes that have been guided in the past by those who

might be considered more *traditional* faculty. Whatever the structure and practice in particular schools, and important element, especially in times of stress, is trust.

Participants made the following notes:

- ♦ Faculty members need to become knowledgeable and engaged in discussions of institutional finance. This doesn't mean that they need to become financial experts, but it *does* mean that there needs to be greater understanding of financial issues by faculty and engagement with addressing challenges.
- ♦ Many participants named *trust* as vital to institutional health and stressed the need to find ways to bridge the chasm between faculty and administration as well as the gap between faculties and boards. Trust is crucial in negotiating the troubled waters of economic uncertainty, and that trust is both essential and fragile.

Changes in the church and faculty work

A key insight from the consultation's discussion of how changes in the church have impacted faculty work was to name the prevalence among both faculty and students in theological schools of a “conflicted ecclesial narrative.” That is, while the stated missions of schools and those serving within the schools agree that they are to serve and lead the church, there is not agreement about what the church has been, is, or is becoming. Among faculty there are competing visions of what the church has been, is, and should be. Among students there is a broad spectrum of ecclesial involvement and understanding, from those who are ecclesiastically “insular” — that is, completely embedded within a denomination or tradition and blind to the broader church — to those who are so ecclesiastically eclectic as to have no clear ecclesial identity at all. The students are motivated by mission and by issues of social justice, but they are not clear about how those motivations fit within the church.

One panelist argued that “hybridity” is a key for the future of theological education. Schools need to develop courses that combine work in class with online resources, as well as courses that provide education at ministry sites utilizing forms of contextual learning.

A Roman Catholic panelist noted the shift for many Catholic schools to provide education for laity, including the rapidly growing body of lay ecclesial ministers who now outnumber candidates for the priesthood. This emerging student body — neither full time nor residen-

tial—creates a new and challenging context for formation.

Participants recommended the following:

- ♦ Theological schools should work to nurture their connections with the church.
- ♦ The schools must work hard to prepare students to be able to serve effectively both where they have come from and where they are going.
- ♦ ATS should seek to promote engagement of schools with churches and Christian life.
- ♦ ATS should recognize and attend to the differences between the situations in the United States and Canada.
- ♦ Those in theological schools must be more hopeful, more realistic, more collaborative, more savvy about organizational life, and more creative.

As the church changes, the faculties of theological schools will need to be attuned both to the needs of the changing church and to effective ways to serve that church and its people.

Looking to the future with hope

Among the crucial and important insights in Jack Schuster's keynote address at the consultation was his observation that despite the unprecedented challenges faced by institutions of higher education in recent years and looking to the future, there is reason for hope.

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Higher education is remarkably durable and has survived remarkable challenges in the past. Schuster charged the faculty to be clear about what they finally value in the work they do and the way the work is done. Now more than ever, faculty need to learn to make the case for higher education to a variety of audiences and to become engaged with the issues and challenges of its present and future. Faculty leadership in the processes of change is crucial. ♦

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Opportunities for faculty development

A Roundtable Seminar for Newly Appointed Faculty

October 21–23, 2011 • Pittsburgh, PA

By nomination of academic dean. Designed for faculty who have completed their first year in an ATS school, this event will address the unique vocation—both individual and corporate—of theological educators. Two academic deans will reflect on what they have learned from working with faculty, and four faculty members will share their experiences of surviving and thriving as theological educators.

ATS Faculty Presentation and Reception at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature Meeting

November 2011 • San Francisco, CA

Faculty from ATS member schools are invited to a reception following a presentation by Glen H. Stassen, Fuller Theological Seminary, about living into the vocation of a theological educator.

Mid-Career Faculty Conference

March 23–25, 2012 • Pittsburgh, PA

By nomination of academic dean. Faculty in the middle stage of their careers will gather to discuss issues of common concern and to explore next steps as they experience life after tenure and emerge into leadership positions in their institutions.