

Seeking the common good: what we can learn from other professional disciplines

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A significant question posed in the ATS Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project was what theological educators could learn from the experiences of other disciplines of graduate professional education. Did law schools, medical schools, and schools of social work, for example, face similar challenges to those facing theological schools? What opportunities are educators in those disciplines (and others) embracing? What might conversations with a range of graduate professional educators reveal about educational models and practices that could be of benefit to leaders of theological schools?

In order to engage those questions, ATS gathered an extraordinary group of experienced and reflective educators from the disciplines of medical humanities, social work, business, medicine, law, graduate humanities, and education for two one-day-and-a-half long conversations (last April and last October) in Chicago. Each participant prepared written reflections for advance reading and spoke about the challenges and opportunities emerging within their disciplines, changes among students and faculty, developments in business models, understandings of professional identity, signature pedagogies, and experiences of accreditation. Engaging the educators from these disciplines were members of the Educational Models and Practices Advisory Committee and staff from Lilly Endowment Inc. and ATS. Shannon Mary Sims



The Graduate Professional Educators Study Group met in April and October of 2018 in Chicago to discuss matters of graduate education in the professions, examining how other fields might inform graduate theological education.

served as recorder and authored reports for each of the meetings.

Participants said they were eager to engage one another, found the conversations mutually beneficial, and explored possibilities of keeping the conversations going.

The goal of the first meeting was *descriptive*, intending to develop a clear picture of the challenges and opportunities graduate programs are facing across the disciplines. The second meeting focused on strategies and the future of the disciplines. In preparation for the second meeting, the group read selections from the Carnegie Foundation's study, "Educating for the Professions," published between 2005 and 2010.

Members of the Graduate Professional Educators Study Group presented their current challenges, such as student debt, often coupled with low starting salaries, lifestyle expectations, vocational choices, and post-graduation pathways. They also addressed questions of professional identity and the formal and informal influences within schools. What is the "hidden" curriculum?

What behaviors are modeled by faculty? Do our professions still have a sense of higher calling? What codes of ethics are upheld? How are graduate schools involved in formation, identity, and vocation?

Shared values and experiences

- **Common challenges.** Graduate professional educators across the disciplines face many common challenges, including enrollment declines, student debt, institutional financial demands, alternative paths to credentials, shaping professional identity, and the need for personal formation of students.
- **Signature pedagogies.** While core courses are often taught in classroom lectures, onsite experience is gaining an increasingly important role in shaping graduate students as professionals. Clinicals, bedside rounds, legal residencies, adult learning strategies, field education, and experiential learning are crucial signature pedagogies in graduate professional education.
- **The professions.** There are shared values of professional identity common to all professions. Professions, to serve the common good, often think beyond old ways of doing things and tap into the expertise of other professions. There is promise of future potential collaboration. The value society places on professional expertise has diminished with the democratization of knowledge, yet what graduate schools offer society goes beyond simple knowledge or information.
- **Professional identity.** Graduate professional programs are forming the professional identities of their students, not only in skill but also in character, using modeling, reflective writing, peer feedback, and learning environments that play an increasingly important role. Students come to graduate schools not only to learn but also to live. Students are attracted to schools by relationships and expect to make lifelong friends and professional colleagues. Even though many schools are moving into online education, the formation of students remains crucial.
- **Adapting to change.** Revenue is driving changes in enrollment and tuition. Title II funds [for teacher training], international enrollment, and out-of-state enrollment are all part of the funding model for many graduate programs. Among the 18 peer groups in the ATS Educational Models and Practices project, a dominant theme was partnerships, as schools seek new ways to fulfill their missions. In the United States, higher education is at risk of receding, while globally there is remarkable expansion of demand for higher education. Schools are navigating the need to add elements to the curriculum yet also the necessity of streamlining the educational process. For-profit educational entities are innovating, and their voices are important to hear. Other educators can learn from them.
- **Faculty.** Adjuncts, often practitioners in the field, play a crucial role in educating students in the professions. Ideally, professional programs have a mix of research and applied faculty, with parallel professional tracks. In some schools, there is a clear hierarchy. Universities often privilege research, yet applied learning is essential to graduate professional education. The clinical, experiential role has risen in importance in many professional curricula. Schools need professional pathways for their clinical faculty.
- **Accreditation.** Accreditation provides data and narratives that faculty can use as vehicles for institutional change. However, accreditation should be flexible enough to allow graduate schools to innovate and respond to changing student needs and emerging markets so that schools can experiment, within reason, as long as the product is still excellent. Most of the educators spoke of the arduous task of accreditation, with many having multiple accrediting agencies.
- **The common good.** The professions are interested in the public good in ways that transcend the separate disciplines. The professions are united by interest in the greater good for all people. Given everything

that has changed, what role do the professions continue to play in society, in holding the social fabric together? Educators in the professions benefit from collaborative conversations about the meaning and purposes of their work and that of their graduates. Educators have a civic responsibility together to build the common good, and there are benefits to conversation, across the disciplines, on formation in the professions.

A case study: the opioid crisis

Colleagues looked together at the opioid crisis, discussing how each of their professions is responding to it.

Law is focusing less on criminal justice and more on treatment. In education and social work, teaching time is spent on addiction and abuse at the individual, family, and societal levels.

Medicine is changing how pain management is taught.

Recommendations for theological education

Theological degree programs would benefit from early field education that integrates theory and practice from

the outset. Theological education is well-positioned to be a thought leader about the public good, provisionally and aspirationally, partnering with the professions to consider how the professions can work toward the public good.

Next steps

How might the professions convene, and contribute to, conversations about the common good in public discourse? We need to gather a diverse group of people as part of any discourse on the common good, bringing people together in a community to discuss values we all share, regardless of differences. An ecumenical organization like ATS, which convenes diverse voices to pursue

shared goals, may have the capacity to bring people together in conversations that address the common good.

There is much, indeed, for theological educators to learn from educators in other graduate disciplines. More detail about these summary points and the full reports of the group's conversations are available on the [ATS website](#).

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