"COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE"  
Association of Theological Schools’ Leadership Education Programs for Senior Administrators in Seminaries

by

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More than 100 senior development officers from seminaries in the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) gather in Orlando, Florida for three days of presentations, discussions, and building friendships – the annual conference of the Development and Institutional Advancement Program. They listen as Greg Henson of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary speaks on the importance of consistent, unified communication within a school, both for fundraising and for other results. They share with one another concerning spiritual practices and their personal disciplines, led by Samuel Hamilton-Pierce and Peter Crouch from San Francisco Theological Seminary. And they discuss a presentation by Chris Meinzer, Director of Finance and Administration at ATS, on the most recent data concerning enrollment, finances, and endowments at ATS schools, the implications for development officers and the seminaries altogether.

As Meinzer presents the data, he notes enrollment declines and financial stresses, speaks of the negative implications, and laments that sometimes the ongoing challenges can be disheartening. One participant interjects: “It is amazing things are not a lot worse!” Discussion focuses on the hopes of the Development and Institutional Advancement Program members amid the changes within churches, the regulatory environment, and the decreases in enrollment. Their hopes are based on the knowledge that they are in some small way participating in God’s work in the world. The Development and Institutional Advancement Program is functioning as a “community of practice.”

The Development and Institutional Advancement Program already existed in 1999 when William Myers took over as ATS staff for the program. He followed the work that Michael Gilligan had done earlier in the 1990s to support Development and Institutional Advancement Program and a biannual meeting for new presidents. Myers expanded the program for presidents, including the introduction of annual meetings for new presidents and experienced presidents, and he designed programs for other senior administrators in the two hundred and more
constituent theological schools. ATS had received a grant to address the fact that development officers frequently came to seminaries innocent of the special challenges and opportunities confronting them. A small group of development officers from a few ATS schools organized some meetings, collected statistics from seminaries willing to cooperate, and periodically published a newsletter. Myers enlarged the pool of participating seminaries, arranged for terms of office for Development and Institutional Advancement Program leaders, and most importantly, worked to have them build a Community of Practice.

Communities of Practice

A Community of Practice possesses a common interest, and in this case, a common profession. The members of the group work together, teaching one another and sharing skills and knowledge of mutual benefit, usually with someone to mentor or coach them at least initially. The members’ own expertise is the most valuable resource in a Community of Practice, though it might continue to rely from time to time on external consultants. The members also construct together some common product that can initiate others in the basics of their Community of Practice, a heuristic product which helps draw new people into the group and encourages them gradually to become proficient members, mutual leaders, and proponents of it. Communities of Practice, as other constructive organizations, generate social capital for a wider public as the expertise is shared broadly over time.

Myers came to ATS from eighteen years on the faculty of Chicago Theological Seminary, where he had also served as dean for eight of those years. “I had been teaching seminary students and others in youth ministry about ‘Communities of Practice’ as a way of developing competence and on-going improvement in congregational leadership,” he explained. “Studies show that young people engaging peers in learning are fully as effective as professional teacher. When Dan Aleshire asked me to leave the deanship at Chicago Theological Seminary and join the ATS staff as Director of Leadership Education,” Myers explained, “I brought the concept, my teaching tools and experience to this vocation. I trusted that ATS provided first rate educational experiences because as a dean I had participated in events led by Michael Gilligan which were indispensable for my work.”

Development and Institutional Advancement Program was one of the five “administrative groups” targeted initially by ATS for leadership development efforts. Building on the work of predecessor Michael Gilligan, Bill Myers and colleague Marsha Foster Boyd came to direct both educational enterprises and to serve in accreditation for the body. Eventually, the accrediting function and the educational operation were divided to conform to new federal regulations, though
representatives from the same schools comprise both non-profit corporations and ATS staff serves both ATS organizations.

In addition to Development and Institutional Advancement Program, ATS has developed programs for seminary presidents, academic deans, chief financial officers, and for student personnel administrators. Supplemental ATS programs now address special issues for those administrators who are members of current racial and ethnic minorities in the North American population, for the growing numbers of women in leadership of seminaries, and to meet the needs of those schools that face particularly difficult times presently for lack of financial resources. Events for faculty and for seminaries in relationship with undergraduate institutions also teach key issues and promote peer relationships among those in ATS schools. To some degree, as the participants in those efforts become trusting colleagues, each of these may become a Community of Practice as well.

The ATS Partnership with the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

Indirectly through support of ATS staff, and in large measure directly through successive grants for programs and initiatives, Lilly Endowment, Inc. has been fostering programs for strategic leadership in seminaries for more than thirty years. A Lilly Endowment grant helped bring the initial planning team together in the 1970s. Another major grant, with the possibility of partial funding in a follow-up grant, permitted the offering of the first executive development programs. Close collaboration between The Endowment’s Vice-President for Religion, Bob Lynn, and two successive Executive directors of ATS, Leon Pacala and James Waits, led to the creation of an Institute for Theological Education Management. Fred Hofheinz from the Endowment and William Baumgaertener and Michael Gilligan from ATS also contributed significantly to the design and ongoing administration of the program and the solicitation of appropriate participants. Two ATS presidents, Vincent Cushing and Harvey Guthrie, served on an Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management, along with several other seminary presidents and other leaders from seminaries, including Barbara Wheeler and Anthony Ruger, who frequently still make presentations to several of the Communities of Practice.

The first program offered senior administrators in ATS schools was in 1982. It involved a three-week summer residential seminar at Arden House, in up-state New York, in collaboration with the Riverside Group of Columbia Business School faculty with a follow-up gathering in December of that year. A comprehensive program introduced presidents and other seminary administrators to current strategic planning methods and to philosophies and practical matters in non-profit management. Named for a pioneer consultant to
many seminaries, the Warren Deem Institute drew seven cohorts of participants and served more than 200 senior administrators in ATS schools over its decade in existence.ii

As the Endowment made its follow-up grant for partial funding, and as ATS attempted to transfer more of the costs per participant to the seminaries sending administrators, attendance at the Institute for Theological Education Management decreased precipitously. The Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management, in a review of the program and assessment of the needs of seminary administrators, determined that brief but intensive times together for those in particular functions would be more affordable, more widely-attended, and still effective for developing the necessary skills and knowledge for competent leadership. Few seminary presidents and other senior administrators felt their schools could afford either the three weeks away or the expense of the Arden House event.

Conversations among themselves and with officers at the Endowment encouraged ATS staff to broaden the range of opportunities to meet new challenges as their constituent schools have confronted them. Craig Dykstra, who in 1989 succeeded Lynn at the Endowment, was a practical theologian and Christian educator, as was Dan Aleshire, who worked with Waits at ATS from 1990 and then succeeded him as Executive Director in 1998. Myers also had been a Christian education professor at Chicago Theological Seminary. Common interests and expectations for adult learning experiences among ATS administrators and Endowment officers yielded a constructive dialogue and a mutual concern for learner-based educational programs.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, both the Endowment and ATS broadened their constituencies, or “democratized” their missions, so to speak. Dykstra, Chris Coble, John Wimmer, and others at the Endowment worked to broaden grant protocols to include all the Christian denominations in the United States and newly-crucial non-denominational congregations and churches. ATS was likewise drawing into its membership and leadership those from evangelical as well as “mainline” traditions, not to mention Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman Catholic backgrounds. At the same time, the Endowment undertook support for seminary trustees with the creation of In Trust and more extensive help for pastors and congregational leaders of every stripe through increasing funding to The Alban Institute, and ATS programs focused on the relationships of theological schools and the religious eco-systems of which they were part. Amidst these changes, though, the focus on senior administrators of ATS schools remained at the center of the ATS educational efforts.
The Distinctive Nature of Seminaries, Presidents, and the ATS

Seminaries in the United States and Canada are distinctive institutions that arose in the early nineteenth century to educate pastors, and subsequently they began to train other church leaders. They arose alongside independent, church-related colleges in the new nation as a part of the eco-system for faith development in the various emergent “denominations.” Some seminaries spawned colleges to prepare for theological education of priests and ministers, and other more recent universities arose with theological seminaries as a vital part of the institutions. Still other free-standing seminaries have arisen as American Christians sought to move beyond denominations and center on the Gospel and evangelization of the world.

Theological schools occupy a special location today as institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada. At the same time, though, they are schools of the churches, many seeking to transmit particular denominational theologies and ideologies.

The Association of Theological Schools is both similar in composition to other accrediting agencies and also distinctive if not unique in one respect. Like most other accrediting agencies, it consists of eligible institutions. Each institution is represented by its president or in some cases by its dean when the dean functions as the president of a theological school in certain traditions or in seminaries with university ties. ATS sets standards for degree programs and a range of institutional issues, affords periodic peer visitation and assurance of the quality of programs in the schools, like other regional and professional accrediting bodies. On the other hand, one of ATS’s purposes, stated early in its constitution, has been to “foster the improvement of theological education.” From the 1970s this has meant strengthening especially the continuing education opportunities of seminary presidents. This now has been broadened to include administration and faculty leadership. In 2005, when the by-laws were revised, the warrant became even more explicit in the first two priorities of the ATS “Statement of Purposes…: to (i) promote the enhancement and improvement of theological schools... (ii) provide a continuing education forum for administrators and faculty in theological education...” (Section 1.2)

This means ATS affords resources as well as regulations. This special purpose is necessary, because seminaries offer no comparable courses of study and occasions for apprenticeship for future presidents and officers in other senior roles in administration that colleges and universities provide. Some chosen to serve as seminary leaders have the necessary “charisms,” instinctive abilities for strategic planning and building teams for competent administration, but few have had previous experience in sharing leadership in such complex enterprises. Strategic leadership, as Richard Morrill and others explore it, consists in
developing “a systemic organizational process.” Such strategic leadership for seminaries, as other institutions for higher education, is dependent on the president first and foremost. But as Morrill phrases it, the goal is to have embedded in the institution itself “a continuous process that drives the institution's systems of evaluation, decision-making, and communication at all levels, including the work of the governing board.”

As Daniel Aleshire has explained for boards, presidents, and church bodies for years, the seminary presidency is a many-sided responsibility, with all the responsibilities crucial ones. In one setting, he described the work to be “like playing chess in six or more different games at the same time.” Leading a self-governing board, (or even more difficult, a board with representatives chosen by church constituencies), is hard enough. But a president must also lead a faculty, a diverse student body, donors and potential donors frequently with eccentric motives and interests, alumni and alumnae, and church “influentials” – all at the same time. Frequently the desires of the various constituencies conflict with one another. Moreover, theological seminaries are seldom at the top of anyone’s list of priorities for giving, nor is the vocation of pastor/priest highly visible as a potential profession for the general public. So, extensive education for seminary presidents is absolutely necessary.

Each Community of Practice for administrators of seminaries – presidents, deans, financial officers, development officers, student services personnel – has developed differently, and each bears unique marks. Though the work with presidents is the most important, and the most extensive, examination of it takes place first. But each of the other four receives some consideration. Moreover, the formation of these Communities of Practice led to initiatives by ATS staff with women administrators, members of current American racial and ethnic minorities, and most recently with administrators of financially-stressed seminaries, and treatment of those initiatives deserves attention as well. An advisory Council for Leadership Education, (formerly the Council for Leadership Development) brings together chairs of the steering committees and advisory groups for all of the Communities of Practice. This oversight group meets annually. Additionally, ATS committees on Women in Leadership in Theological Education and on Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education meet annually to give advice on leadership education among other matters.

The Presidential Leadership Intensive Week

Following the decade of the Institute for Theological Education Management seminars, aimed primarily at presidents, but open to deans, financial, and development officers as well, the Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management recommended an annual, intensive time for seminary presidents.
Aleshire and Myers found that meetings in Santa Fe, New Mexico offered an attractive but not flashy setting, and there were few distractions once there. Likewise, they discovered a week in early December proved more suitable for most seminary presidents than other weeks of the year. As one president expressed it, “Nobody wants a seminary president as Christmas approaches. It’s about our only ‘down’ time.”

Myers offered direction for the first six “Intensives,” as they came to be called, and succeeded nicely by all assessments in “leading from behind,” i.e., giving attention to important goals and curriculum balance but receding into the background allowing presidents to provide peer leadership in the actual event. He drew together a planning team of presidents from Catholic and Protestant seminaries, both “evangelical” and “mainline.” Women and “racial/ethnic” presidents were prominent in planning and among the leaders for sessions of the seminars. Aleshire usually gave a keynote address that offered insights concerning both problems and the possibilities for theological schools. A recently retired seminary president, Douglass Lewis, formerly president of Wesley Theological Seminary, served as “Dean.” Martha Horne, now President Emerita of Virginia Theological Seminary, succeeded Lewis as “dean” of the Intensive, and she serves with the active collaboration of a planning committee.

Myers explained that he tried to make certain each seminar included a faith-based speaker for inspiration, a pragmatic professional providing essential wisdom from outside the profession, a set of workshops led by peers (or consultants well-known among the presidents) and plenty of time for participants to engage in constructive and candid conversation concerning their work and lives.

For the past three years, since Myers’ retirement, the Intensives have been coordinated by several staff from ATS, including Janice Edwards-Armstrong, Director of Leadership Education, Carol Lytch, Assistant Executive Director of ATS (2007-2011), Chris Meinzer, Director of Finance and Administration, and Stephen Graham, Director of Faculty Development and Initiatives in Theological Education. They have retained the Santa Fe site and the December location in presidents’ calendars, the essence of the Intensives as originally envisioned, and the effort to share faith without dividing presidents according to theological confessions and ideology. Essentially, the presidents study together in a three year cycle. One year is devoted more to institutional advancement issues, a second to finances, and the third to leadership. But maintaining the categories are less important than treating the issues raised by the planning groups from listening to evaluations and requests.

For the December, 2011 Intensive, the curriculum includes focus on financial stresses in seminaries, on creative uses of property, on legal issues, and on the
future directions in technology for theological education. Speakers include Aleshire, Meinzer, Ryan Bolger of Fuller Seminary, Tom Johnson, a partner in the law firm of K&L Gates, and Michael Cooper-White, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Numbers of presidents present cases from their own schools for discussion in plenary and small groups.

The New Presidents Seminar

The oversight committee planning educational events for presidents, together with Myers and Aleshire, quickly determined that new seminary presidents needed a special event to name and introduce quickly the special problems confronting them and some resources available for them — a “boot camp,” as it came to be termed. They needed to learn of the Communities of Practice that existed among seminary presidents and the willingness of many to share wisdom and experience freely. A weekend in January was selected, and New Orleans, Louisiana, with its out of season rates before Mardi Gras became the site. More recently, the site has been changed to San Antonio, Texas.

Approximately 20 new presidents meet each year to learn from experienced presidents and specialists in theological education, and also to listen to one another. They learn of ATS resources especially, including the availability of staff to help them problem-solve, and the Strategic Information Report, developed as a joint effort of ATS and the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, and administered by ATS. They hear not only of the Auburn Center, but also of the resources of “In Trust,” focused on seminary trustee development.

The Chief Academic Officers Society

Though academic deans had gathered occasionally, usually as part of a dissemination effort of some project or research, Marsha Foster Boyd gave staff leadership and over time guided the formation of a Communities of Practice following the model of the Development and Institutional Advancement Program. Currently, in the even-numbered years of ATS biennials, they meet for a full day before the larger body convenes. In odd-numbered years, they meet in March for three days. A planning committee working with Janice Edwards-Armstrong, Stephen Graham, and other ATS staff develop programs responding to issues concerning academic administration, curriculum, teaching and learning, educational evaluation, and the use of technology for instruction.
The deans especially covet informal time together. This is perhaps the only time most get to interact substantively with other theological school deans and compare notes on academic leadership.

The Chief Financial Officer Society

Meeting each year in middle November, the Chief Financial Officers Society (CFOS) draws 80-100 financial officers to a three-day conference usually held in different cities annually. In addition to plenaries and presentations by consultants, they offer times for “huddles,” in which Chief Financial Officers especially are presenting and discussing confidentially the problems and issues they encounter in management.

Meinzer, who serves as primary ATS liaison and staff for Chief Financial Officers, says that the Chief Financial Officers and others with major responsibility for financial management are more sensitive than most groups to “keeping the agenda on pragmatic matters.” With a background in theological education as well as a CPA, he tries subtly to develop their sense of ministerial service, and he believes theological issues that arise are well-handled by the financial officers in their “huddles” and in informal times together.

The Student Personnel Administrators Network

Schools vary widely in their treatment of student life and vocational direction of students. A variety of seminary officers handle student affairs. The annual three-day conference focuses on vocational identity, best practices, and spiritual formation. Student assessment and issues related to accreditation have comprised recent presentations.

The ATS “New” Initiatives Communities of Practice

With the word “initiatives” the word “new” is redundant, but it is a useful expression in this context, for it indicates both irony and adaptation. The fact is that two ATS initiatives are well developed. They are no longer fledglings. But the ATS staff and the advisory Council for Leadership Education continue to draw together new groups with common professions and problems is also referenced with the phrase. Women in leadership, African Americans in senior administrative positions, leaders in seminaries with a Spanish-speaking heritage, and most recently, administrators in financially-stressed seminaries have been seen to desire and need Communities of Practice. ATS programs have centered
on providing peer settings for them to give mutual help and to receive appropriate resources from others.

Women in Leadership

Women in Leadership is the most extensive Community of Practice among the “newer” ones. It was called for in the early 1980s by Barbara Wheeler and Jeanette Bauermeister, the two female members of the Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management, as well as by many of the males in the group. Barbara Brown Zikmund, the President of Hartford Seminary at the time wrote prophetically of the need for more women in theological education leadership, especially as the numbers and impact of women in ministry and preparation for ministry were already growing.

Women in Leadership has grown as the number of women in seminary leadership has grown, even though the percentage of women in seminary faculties and senior administrators is still far below that of women students in ATS schools. In the fall of 2010, more than a third of the total number of seminary students were female, while fewer than 25% of the faculty and senior administrators were female.

Currently, Women in Leadership gathers in an annual conference on professional development, especially for those in mid-level administrative positions. Conferences generally attract 30-40 participants. Early in the program, women who serve as deans and presidents gathered for a retreat, but in more recent years, the smaller gatherings have been coordinated with the Presidents Intensive for women presidents and Chief Administrative Officers for women deans. Because there are twice as many women deans as presidents, the group of women deans is larger than the presidents group. As part of the Women in Leadership program, ATS completed a practitioner based research project on women in senior administrative positions, directed by Barbara Brown Zikmund. Women in Leadership seeks both to support women in senior positions and to encourage more gender-inclusive faculties and administrations.

Racial/Ethnic Faculty and Administrators

African American seminaries have existed since Reconstruction, and several historically black schools belong to the ATS. Moreover, increasing numbers of African Americans have enrolled in all ATS seminaries, and increasing numbers of African Americans have come to teach and administer in ATS schools as well. Again, the numbers in positions of authority in ATS seminaries is still a smaller percentage of the total numbers than is the number of black students enrolled.
African American deans and presidents gather annually, and their Community of Practice is of course symbiotic relationship with the five Communities of Practice by office.

In addition, an ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity oversees with ATS staff a concerted program of consultation with several seminaries seeking ways to enhance the capacity of seminaries to educate pastors and other church leaders for a multi-racial world and church.

Institutional Viability and Financially Stressed Schools

The “industry” of theological education has long been relatively fragile and recent financial stresses have added to the vulnerability of schools. ATS has completed the first phase of a project to help schools address their financial stresses and to explore new and creative ways to develop sustainable economic models. “Our newest initiative is gathering schools that are especially pressed financially right now,” says Graham. “We bring together teams from a school — the president, the dean, and a significant leader from the board, usually the chair. They can share openly about their problems in the confidential and sympathetic environment.” A Community of Practice has developed within this cohort of schools and what has been learned will be shared with the schools in the project’s second phase.

It should be noted that the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation has also supported the ATS Women in Leadership initiative.

Altogether 757 administrators and faculty members of ATS schools participated during the 2010-2011 year in ATS Leadership Development programs. Graham and Meinzer estimate that represents about one-half of the total number of senior administrators eligible to participate in leadership education events. This is a remarkably high percentage considering the diversity of schools and the pressures of time and money upon personnel. But the Communities of Practice reach more than half through the various “products” that emanate from their collaboration.

“Products” from the Communities of Practice

For some years, the ATS had invited seminary presidents and other faculty and administrators to contribute articles for a journal, Theological Education. As communities of practice grew, however, ATS took the initiative to develop particular resources for those functioning in each of the administrative offices.
As a part of the Lilly Endowment funded Leadership Education program, A *Handbook for Seminary Presidents* was conceived by the advisory committee on presidential resources. Dougliss Lewis, retired President of Wesley Theological Seminary and founding director of a new leadership center at Wesley named in his honor, chaired the advisory committee and undertook editing the book with Lovett Weems, recently retired president of Saint Paul School of Theology who was joining The Lewis Center for Church Leadership and now directs it.

The *Handbook for Seminary Presidents* involved the collaboration of more than 100, almost all presidents actively serving, with teams of three designing and writing each of sixteen chapters — one on each major responsibility. Chapters included consideration of the president's vocation and leadership, roles in governance, strategic planning, academic life, financial management, facilities management, institutional advancement, and enrollment management. Chapters also explored the president's external role with accrediting agencies, legal authorities, and other publics, the president's role in "culture-forming," and the special responsibilities of presidents who are female, "racial/ethnic presidents," and those in Canadian schools.

The *Handbook for Seminary Presidents* is also a "product" of a community of Practice, according to Bill Myers. So is *C(h)aos Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Education*, forthcoming in late 2011. It gathers the wisdom from scores of current practitioners and those who have recently completed service. Edited by Bruce Birch, former dean of Wesley Theological Seminary, and Kadi Billman, former dean of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, the handbook offers more information and wisdom about serving as a dean in a theological seminary than any other written document in existence. The Chief Administrative Officers have also developed a secure listserv on the ATS website, where deans can ask about issues and problems, receive responses from veterans, and together solve some of the myriad problems they confront.

*Colloquy*, the Association's newsletter disseminates important information to the Communities of Practice, including regular sections devoted to presidents, chief academic officers, development personnel, student personnel administrators, chief financial officers, and faculty.

**Major Conclusions from the Leadership Development Program of ATS**

Assessments of theological education management over the past thirty years show that seminaries have adopted many of the lessons from the ATS programs. Overall, they are better managed today, and the suspicion of strategic planning and best practices taught by business schools for non-profits is overcome and
their insights are well-received for the most part. Evaluations of the Institute for Theological Education Management showed improvement even during the 1980s. Subsequent surveys and results of accrediting reports indicate the same. Problems remain, though. They are perhaps exacerbated today by the economic conditions in North America more broadly, but certainly on account of the small scale of seminaries in comparison with other institutions of higher education. Moreover, the rapid turnover in seminary leadership demands continued attention to their education and assimilation in the Communities of Practice. The rapid speed of change in the religious eco-systems of which seminaries partake, the qualitative shifts in the ways North Americans interact and learn, and the increasing regulation and monitoring by governments and by free-lance rating agencies all have profound effects on administrative methods and effective seminary leadership.

The seven iterations of the Warren Deem Institute taught that seminary administrators certainly had need of instruction in management of the complex institutions, but there were severe limits on the resources of the schools, both human and financial. Participants in the Institute for Theological Education Management sang its praises, both numbers of long-term presidents as well as other seminary administrators. Few schools, however, could afford to send a president or another senior administrator to a three week event with a one week follow-up in the same year, and the tuition for such an event proved forbidding as well.

A secondary goal of the program — to identify and train persons who would come to occupy senior administrative positions in seminaries — could not be achieved either. As Dan Aleshire now explains, “It really was not our job, anyway. Seminaries call those with experience in the tradition or compatibility with it. We at ATS are responsible for supporting those chosen by faith communities. ATS does, however, open most Women in Leadership and Racial/Ethnic opportunities for those who might be selected for service.”

In the third place, the Advisory Committee on Theological Education Management hoped that seminaries would send administrators to the Institute for Theological Education Management in behalf of developing “senior management teams” in which most members of the team had attended the Institute for Theological Education Management. While a few did send two, most said they could not afford the human or monetary costs.

ATS leaders and officers in the Lilly Endowment re-conceived the educational program in favor of Communities of Practice for each division among senior administrators, hoping the instruction would lead to the development of a team in the school. David L. Tiede, a leader in ATS and president of Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota for eighteen years, says his participation and that
of senior administrators at his seminary did lead to better teamwork. “My major lesson came in learning how vital it is for the president to elicit excellent candidates for the board, to educate them and support them in their governance. The deans at Luther during my time there worked tirelessly in behalf of our administration being a good team together, and I supported them in that endeavor.”

Indeed, as the presidential Community of Practice grew in numbers and depth of collaboration, responsibility for board development was impressed on all by those wise and effective in the work. Tiede, Lewis, and Robert E. Cooley, longtime president at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, all practiced and taught that priority in their work at their schools and in the Community of Practice. Cooley is fond of saying that he found a full one-third of his time was spent in relating to the board, and he found that time most fruitfully used for the life of the school.

The importance of presidents developing boards is just one of the themes struck constantly by Executive Director Aleshire, who annually addresses them in both the Intensive and in the New Presidents Workshop. He stresses other issues as he speaks to the remaining Communities of Practice, but he consistently focuses on the pertinent issues and possibilities that confront leaders in seminaries. David Tiede concludes that Aleshire’s addresses, and his willingness to listen and counsel with members of the Communities of Practice is a major resource for all of them. Douglass Lewis agrees. “Dan Aleshire knows more about theological education than anyone else,” he advises. “For him to share the information and the vision for seminaries is crucial for all of us.”

Aleshire, in his presentations to the various Communities of Practice, tries to bring longer term, philosophical issues to bear for conversations. “Because the Communities of Practice are peer directed,” he declares, “they naturally center on the more immediate issues for the administrators. But administrators need to observe some from the balcony as well as participate in the dance.” Here he alludes to the insight of Ronald Heifetz whose work is a staple for many of the seminary administrators.\textsuperscript{vii}

Aleshire and the rest of the ATS staff concur that the various Communities of Practice feed one another, and the leadership development program exists in symbiosis with the rest of what the Association does. As in the rest of theological education, it all works together. According to Myers, “Leadership education events are a locus for identifying common issues and breaking down ‘silos’ in many seminaries.” Aleshire echoes the insight. “We locate people and institutions in the Communities of Practice that can help us in other parts of the work ATS does,” he explains. “We also learn of problems and issues that need to be addressed.”
“We have discovered the comparative value of peer led learning and teaching models,” concludes Aleshire. “It seems to succeed better overall than an expert-driven model, such as we had in the Institute for Theological Education Management. We still use experts, but we rely most upon those who are the real experts in what seminary presidents, deans, and other officers do — the people themselves.”

Evaluation and assessment from the events and during the events lead to improvements in the following events, both in the Communities of Practice themselves and in the overall operation of the ATS. Myers remembered how passing around the evaluations from a presidents’ meeting gave the names and potential topics. “It was the perfect time to listen to what people experienced and what they thought necessary for their mastery of the responsibilities.” Evaluation has also led to modifications in the “leading from behind” style that first characterized the Communities of Practice gatherings. Meinzer and other staff have been asked to present, for example, and now their offerings of gathered statistics, insights, and trends can be received in a plenary without any sense of “intrusion from staff.” “The communities of practice are now confident of their ability to help one another,” he says; “and they consider us part of that group — not outsiders.”

The evaluations that begin as “summative” will turn into “formative” ones as we move to plan for the future. Graham adds that now the assessment forms ask both about the “effectiveness” and the “importance” of each part. Such ratings differentiate the teaching/learning and the potential for application. “We keep getting more precise and better able to think about the growth of the communities of practice altogether.”

“Bill Myers, with Marsha Foster Boyd, working on it hard for a good long time, really made of ATS a school for the leaders of the seminaries in the U.S. and Canada,” affirms Aleshire. “Steve Graham, Chris Meinzer, and Janice Edwards-Armstrong are building on that foundation.”

Thorough indebtedness to Daniel O. Aleshire, Stephen R. Graham, Chris A. Meinzer, Janice Edwards-Armstrong, and Nadine Banks of the Association of Theological Schools for warm hospitality and good conversations, to David L. Tiede and G. Douglass Lewis for helpful phone interviews, and especially to William Myers, who gave the better part of a day in retirement to teach me about the programs. Gratitude also to each of these people for helping with the accuracy of the manuscript. Many of the expressions have been borrowed from their articles, reports, and notes.
Based in the philosophies of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, CoP theory developed quite recently, though of course organized apprenticeship and recognized mastery within a profession have been prevalent in the West at least since guilds arose in classical cultures and Medieval Europe. The term “CoP” was coined in the late 1990s. See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998); Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard Business Press, 2002); Chris Kimble, Paul Hildrith, Isabelle Bourdon, *Communities of Practice: Creating Learning Environments for Educators* (Information Age Pub. 2008).

Personally, I participated in the first of the Institute for Theological Education Management workshops and found the seminar the most useful formal educational experience of my career. Faculty presentations and case studies on financial, personnel, and development issues were especially effective. In the early days of personal computers, the seminar afforded a bank of sixteen state of the art desktop IBM’s, with “Excel” and other software installed, equipment we learned to use and help teach one another during the weekends and “free” evenings.


In the interest of full disclosure, I participated in four of the Presidential “Intensives” and served as a presenter for two of the New President Seminars. I found the leadership of Myers and Foster Boyd superb, the keynotes by Aleshire outstanding, and I appreciated the balance in curriculum between plenary sessions and small group discussions.

G. Douglass Lewis and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., eds., *A Handbook for Seminary Presidents* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) I was privileged to share responsibility for the chapter on governance with Cooley.