



ATFE

Association for
Theological Field Education

2019 ATFE Biennium

**TRENDS WITHIN THE CHANGING
LANDSCAPE OF THEOLOGICAL
EDUCATION**

Frank M. Yamada

Trends within the Changing Landscape of Theological Education

Association of Theological Field Education

Frank M. Yamada

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A. Introduction

1. In my first year as Exec. Dir., I have spent a lot of time in airports and on planes—a theological version of *Up in the Air*. Needless to say that my metaphors and illustrations have often been crafted when I have been 40,000 ft. in the air.
 - a. I am a window-seat person, because I enjoy catching a view of the cities and states that I visit from 40,000 ft.
 - b. Things look very differently when you have an opportunity to pull back and see things from an elevated perspective.
 - c. Tonight, I invite you to take a 40,000 ft. view of theological education.
 - d. “I borrowed the metaphor from organizational guru, David Allen, whose book, *Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, is entrenched in business book canons as being a go-to source for developing a system of organization for oneself and one’s organization (and, by the way, I would totally recommend it for churches, organizations, and individuals—pastors or seminarians—who are seeking to have a better grasp of how to organize one’s work and life). He uses different elevations to describe the various perspectives from which one can view one’s life and work. The 50,000 ft. level helps you to address the big issues of life, for example, “What is my purpose?” Whereas the runway level begs the question, “What is the next action?” (e.g., respond to Jane’s email, read the report for my next meeting, call back Bob, etc.). The 40,000 ft. view is the 3–5 year horizon, which for Allen describes the larger trends in one’s industry and social world.”¹
 - e. Today’s presentation is climbing to 45,000 ft., somewhere between the larger trends and the big questions of life.
 - f. As Allen recommends, it is a good discipline in life and in work to, regularly pull back and view your current situation from the broader perspective—to take time to evaluate your current situation and goals given the broader horizon of your life and the work to which you are committed.

B. Mission and Vision of ATS

1. Mission – the mission of ATS is “to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.”
 - a. This mission statement captures the work that ATS has been about for a century.
 - i. This past June in Denver, ATS celebrated 100 years as an organization.
 - b. It is a unique organization in that it is comprised of 278 schools from across the theological spectrum—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline

¹ Executive Director Report, ATS Board of Directors (November/December, 2017). Referencing David Allen, *Getting Things Done* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

- Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant (and accepted into membership its first Jewish member in decades)—all working toward the same goal...
- i. Quality and Improvement in theological education.
- c. In this time...
 - i. Of polarized politics, where the right and left are at a political and social impasse, in fact, the alt. right doesn't get along with the right, and the radical left doesn't have any confidence in the mainstream left
 - ii. When denominations are fracturing along the same political and social lines
 - iii. ATS is a witness to the church and society, demonstrating what can happen when peoples and groups from very different theological commitments work together toward a common goal—quality in theological education.
2. Vision – bi-focal vision, seeing through two lenses.
 - a. Legacy – continue this legacy of cross-ecclesial work to improvement and quality in theological education.
 - i. We do this because quality theological education matters.
 - ii. We do this because ATS schools believe that trained leadership makes a difference in churches and society.
 - iii. We do this together—where our differences and our diversity enhances what we do—because we believe that our collective wisdom is better than the wisdom of any one school or tradition.
 - b. Innovation
 - i. One of the consistent refrains we hear from schools (engaged 86% of the membership last year) is the profound nature and rapid pace of change happening in the schools.
 - ii. ATS will direct its resources—initiatives, leadership development/education, research, data interpretation—to foster and support innovation in the schools.
- C. The Broader Context – the changing place and influence of religion and religious institutions in public life.
1. The Pew Survey has taught us much about the Nones and the Dones or the Non-affiliated
 - a. The fastest growing segment of religious or spiritually-oriented people in the U.S. are the non-affiliated, or those who choose not to be associated with any particular religious tradition.
 - b. Nones make up a fifth of the entire U.S. population and one third of young adults—those under the age of 30, also known as the Millennial generation.²
 - i. And these numbers are growing.
 - c. Now, I called the Nones, “religious or spiritually-oriented people,” because it would be a mistake to say that this heterogeneous group is predominantly secular or non-believing.
 - i. In fact, two-thirds of the non-affiliated believe in God
 - ii. More than a third of them would say that they are “spiritual” though not “religious.”
 - iii. And about 20% of them say they pray daily.

² “The Rise of the None,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

- d. That being said, there is no indication that these folks will be lining up to be the next wave of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Evangelicals, or Roman Catholics any time soon.
 - i. Many churches, some successfully (but mostly not), have sought to reach out to this group of young people, but research indicates they are not joiners of our traditional religious institutions.
 - e. Here is a freebie: Many non-affiliated are participating religious institutions—churches, seminaries, faith-based non-profits—but they likely will not show up on membership roles or stewardship drive lists (in order for them to be donors, we first have to give them good, steady employment). So, here is the first freebie—Let them work, give them jobs with a live-able wage.
 - f. We put a tremendous load of debt on this generation's back and on the back's of their parents, all in the name of higher education—an education that used to lead to employment and productive citizenship
 - i. It's time to let them lead us.
 - ii. They very well could be the Joshua, Caleb's, and Rahab's of this generation.
 - iii. The generation who looks on a land of promise and, unlike the previous generation, sees not giants, defeat, and death but a land flowing with milk and honey—a fulfillment of promise and not possession.
 - iv. It is time to pass the torch, to hand the baton over to those who will anchor the next leg of this race.
 - g. Here is the second freebie—or piece of advice that I am going to give even though you didn't ask for it:
 - i. Rather than falling back on our member's only model of religious practice, why not JOIN them.
 - ii. In many ways, the 21st C. congregation is finding its voice again on the streets, in the public square, not in the pulpit or in the pews, but at the erected podium of a protest or in the walking mass of humanity that seeks a justice that is greater than our polarized political stalemate.
 - iii. If we want to partner with the future, we need to let them lead, even as we walk side-by-side with them—side by side, not in front, not pushing from behind—but side by side with them, witnessing to the legacies of faith that inform our march.
 - 1. If we want to be mentors and elders of a movement, we must serve WITH not take charge.
 - 2. And, then, this generation will discover for itself the wealth of resources within our faith traditions that lend themselves to movement making—to live as the prophet, Micah, exhorts us: to DO justice, to LOVE mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.
 - 3. Example: Stephen's prophetic underpinnings.
2. Changing role of religion – All of these data and stories point to a growing lack of confidence in religious institutions, even as religion continues to be hiding the background of much of our political and social debates. While religion is far from gone in the public sphere, its role and place in society has changed.
- a. In the middle of the 20th century, the church still held a central place in both the town square and in the public eye.

- i. Pastors held positions of esteem in local communities and were looked to be voices of conscience and moral authority within the community.
 - ii. Parishioners would turn to them on matters of politics, social and family life, in ways that many do not today.
 - b. The church itself was seen as a place that held us together—the social glue of our existence.
 - c. Today, church competes with many other allegiances, including Sunday soccer and little league games.
 - d. There are many forces that led up to this growing distrust of religious institutions—and we don't have enough time today to unpack those forces.
 - e. But it is important for us to recognize this when we consider the underlying currents that are moving us downstream in a certain direction.
 - i. These currents have precedent. They have a rationale. They are real. And they are not going away any time soon.
 - ii. AND, they affect all of us in the world of theological education, since the missions of our schools all seek to form leaders for the church and society.
- 3. There are also forces of change in higher education
 - a. The most obvious effect of these changes can be seen in the rising costs of higher education.
 - i. Personal example of college visits with our children
 - 1. I have some personal experience of putting my two millennial children through college.
 - a. What used to be a retirement nest-egg is now an “adequate” down payment on tuition.
 - 2. Recruiting was less discernment and more a marketing pitch, which included plush apartments—didn't we used to call those dorms?
 - ii. All of those buildings—and the perpetual cranes that are erected on most campuses across the country—come with a price tag.
 - 1. And those price tags require donors.
 - 2. And those donors need a fundraiser—and those fundraisers, at least at the typical research one university, have large, corporate-sized salaries.
 - 3. And as the cashier rings up the total in the grocery line of your higher ed. experience, she says, “Your total comes to ...a lifetime of debt.”
 - b. There is another force on the horizon in higher education—the impending decline in enrollments
 - i. The Atlantic ran an article last summer stating that “the United States is running out of teenagers.”³
 - 1. Related to the drop-off in births after the 2008-9 recession.

³ Derek Thompson, “This Is the Way the College ‘Bubble’ Ends” (2017, July 26) *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/college-bubble-ends/534915/>.

- ii. Since 2010, total enrollments at degree-granting postsecondary institutions has declined from just over 21M to under 20M, or just under 5%.⁴
 - 1. The Millennial bubble is complete and the next generation on its heels is just now entering undergraduate school, which results in less demand for higher education (for now).
 - 2. When one couples this with the growing number of colleges, universities, and technical schools, it is not a stretch to assume that we are heading in to a period of consolidation in higher education (in general).
 - 3. This decline in the number of students attending undergraduate institutions will have an effect on all of graduate education, including graduate theological education.
- 4. Seminaries are at the intersection of these two forces of change between higher ed. and the church.
 - a. This is why it should not surprise us when the dominant theme that we hear from all ATS schools is change.
 - b. But there is something particular and unique about the changes that we are experiencing.
- 5. Thomas Friedman, a columnist for *The New York Times*, calls this “An age of accelerations.” The full title of his new book is: *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in an Age of Accelerations.*
 - a. In some ways, his new book is not very new. He ruminates on our current situation, addressing the kinds of issues that one would assume from Friedman—how to manage our lives of technology, naming the threats and new realities in what he calls a post-post-Cold War era, climate change, etc.
 - b. These big changes are what Friedman argues characterize this age of accelerations. Not only are we changing, but we are changing rapidly and in profound ways.
 - c. To give a sense of how the world is changing, here’s a quote from one of his earlier works:
 - i. “In 2005, Facebook didn’t exist for most people. Twitter was still a sound, the cloud was something in the sky, 3G was a parking space, applications were what you sent to colleges, and Skype was a typo.”⁵
 - d. This is not just a change from a post-industrial economy to a tech economy, this is a new world.
- 6. We are living in an accelerated time, where change is not just an addition to our life but is a multiplying factor. Change is happening at a faster pace, increasing our ability to do certain things and complicating our lives exponentially in other ways.
 - a. BUT—that’s a disjunctive *waw* for those of you Hebrew purists—BUT, as I stated in my earlier lecture, change is nothing new to the church and to

⁴ Total number of enrolled students (fall) was 21,019,438 (2010) and 19,977,270 (2017), a difference of 1,042,168 (or 4.958%). Published by the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_303.10.asp?current=yes).

⁵ Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2010).

theological education. In fact, change—indeed faithful change—is part of our DNA as the people of God.

- b. Before we do some further theological reflection on this idea of crisis/challenge and faithful change, let's take a look at the current trends and realities within theological schools.

D. Current Trends and Realities

1. Exercise: Close your eyes.
 - a. I want you to close your eyes and imagine your typical seminary.
 - b. Now I want you to imagine your typical seminarian
 - c. What did you see?
 - d. [We don't have time to gather the images that you imagined]
 - e. But if you were to ask someone this same question in the 20th C. you would have likely received predictable responses:
 - i. The seminary would have been some image of a lovely, residential campus with hallowed halls for learning.
 - ii. The seminarian would have also been relatively homogenous in terms of race, gender, and age.
2. Now, if you were to identify and break down all of the elements within these two images, you would find, that for the seminary and seminarian of the 21st Century, almost all of these categories have shifted.
 - a. Let me paint in broad strokes what these changes look like.
3. We are seeing changes in every aspect of theological education:
 - a. In the school's structure or the model of the institution
 - b. In the programs and delivery of those programs
 - c. In the students that these schools serve
4. With regard to the **School's structure or model.**
 - a. We are seeing a significant increase in the number of schools that are merging or embedding within larger contexts (e.g., colleges or universities)
 - b. Since 2010, there have been 28-29 schools that have engaged in merging or embedding.⁶
 - i. This number is over 10% of the ATS member schools within a seven-year period. ATS schools are merging at a rate of about one merger for every 3-4 months.
 - c. Embedded schools now represent about 45% of the membership.
 - i. We expect that by the time that the Standards are redeveloped—something that the Board of Commissioners will be voting on later this week (and if the process is approved, a vote will go to the membership at the June biennial—that a majority of ATS schools will be embedded.
 - ii. The current standards were written with an independent, free-standing school in mind. Increasingly, however, the image that one has in one's mind when one closes one's eyes is of a school that is embedded in a college or university.
 - d. This is not a prescription for the future of theological schools
 - i. Merging is not the answer for all schools.

⁶ I have updated this number. There have been two mergers in February-March of 2019.

- ii. Merging and embedding is more likely the byproduct of an increasing number of schools serving a flat or decreasing number of students.
- 5. Schools are also changing in terms of their **programs and delivery**.
 - a. The Masters of Divinity degree is relatively flat and has been declining over time, while there has been growth in the number of students who are taking professional and academic MA degrees.
 - b. Over 20 years ago, there were no schools offering online courses or degree programs.
 - i. Today, almost two-thirds of ATS schools have online courses and over a quarter have completely online degree programs.
 - c. However, distance learning only tells part of the story.
 - i. Degrees and programs are increasingly moving to **deeper engagement of a student's context**.
 - 1. Schools have been engaged in Competency Based Education, where programs are developed after extensive surveys from churches and denominational leaders about what their leaders need from their education.
 - 2. Often a student is now using his/her current ministry context not just as a site of learning, but the context itself becomes the content through which Bible, theology, ministry, and history is unpacked.
 - 3. This is a reversal of the traditional model of theological education.
- 6. If schools are changing, so are the **student bodies** whom they serve.
 - a. For the majority of the 20th C. the typical seminary student was white, male, younger, full-time, residential, attending a school of the same denomination in which the student was raised.
 - i. And the denomination or this person's local church supported that seminarian.
 - ii. The graduate would then go on to serve a church within the same denomination.
 - b. The 21st C. student is increasingly a student of color, older, part-time, a local commuter or local resident, attending a school that is not of his/her denomination, and is already engaged in a local ministry context.
 - i. This person is also usually sole funder of his/her theological education.
 - c. Another way to put these changes—students are increasingly less denominationally and more locally/geographically engaged with their seminary.
 - d. This is why it is not uncommon for a Latinx Pentecostal pastor to be trained at a Presbyterian Church U.S.A. seminary.
- 7. That is not to say that **residential theological education** is dead.
 - a. Some schools are doubling-down on the residential model of theological education
 - b. AND, increasingly, those schools are also asking questions about how to best leverage residential community for theological education.
 - i. Old assumption was that residential student (and faculty) student population would naturally lead to community.

- ii. Not necessarily the case – What difference does it mean to learn theology, form students for leadership and ministry in NYC, Denver, Nashville, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Dubuque, Iowa?

E. Response from ATS and COA to these Changing Realities – Strategic Moment – In this crisis/creativity moment, both boards of the ATS/COA [ATS has two organizations each with its own board, both working toward a common purpose—to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader society]... the boards have recognized that this is a strategic moment for both organizations. Both boards have engaged in strategic processes that seek to address this critical moment for theological schools.

1. Redevelopment of the Standards

- a. In its last meeting, the Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to recommend to the membership to engage in two-year process in which the Standards of accreditation will be redeveloped.
- b. At the 2018 Biennial Meeting in Denver, the membership took the Commission's recommendation and voted unanimously to begin a process of Standards redevelopment. [I'll describe more about this]

2. Strategic Priorities

- a. Also, at the last meeting of the ATS Board of Directors, they voted to being a process of identifying strategic priorities that will set the parameters for strategic investment in the schools – investment in programs, initiatives, and research that will support the schools in this crisis/opportunity moment.
- b. Because of the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, ATS is in a position to identify key strategic areas of support to support the schools.

In my remaining time, I want to provide some more information about the Redevelopment of the Standards and set up two sets of broad questions that will inform both the Standards and strategic priorities process.

F. Redevelopment of the Standards

1. Background to the Redevelopment

- a. ATS is a member organization, and therefore, the membership (not we the staff at 10 Summit Park Drive in Pittsburgh) are charged with the development of and the enforcement of the Standards.
- b. 2018 Membership Vote – as I said earlier, this past June the membership voted to begin a process of redeveloping the Standards
- c. The Standards have undergone comprehensive redevelopment only twice in the ATS' 100 years in 1972 and 1996.
 - i. There have also been revisions about every six years, the last more modest revision was in 2010-2012.
- d. The original Standards, adopted in 1938, included nine standards, 610 words and would fit on one standards size piece of 8 ½ by 11 piece of paper TO today's Standards, which are just short of 30,000 words on 106 pages.
 - i. Anecdote about Presidential Intensive

2. Reasons for Redeveloping the Standards (Tom Tanner's article, "Five Reasons for Redevelopment"): <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/five-reasons-for-redevelopment.pdf>).

- a. The membership has asked for a comprehensive redevelopment
 - i. In the search process for Executive Director in 2016, the membership was surveyed and one of the highest priorities identified was “a revision of the accrediting standards to be relevant and flexible and to encourage innovation.”
 - ii. An unprecedented number of petitions authorizing exceptions to the current Standards or for schools to conduct experiments
 - b. It’s time
 - i. By the next Biennial Meeting, it will have been 24 years since the last comprehensive redevelopment (1996, before that 1972)
 - c. ATS member schools have changed significantly since 1996
 - i. In 1996, the plurality of schools (45%) were Mainline Protestant
 - 1. ATS is currently about 45% Evangelical Protestant, 33% Mainline Protestant, and 22% Roman Catholic or Orthodox
 - ii. Currently about 45% of schools are embedded, and with mergers happening on average about every 3-4 months, we expect that by 2020 ATS will be a majority embedded schools rather than free-standing institutions.
 - iii. 20 years ago, no ATS schools were offering online courses. Currently, two-thirds now offer courses or entire programs online.
 - iv. Typical student
 - d. One of the major goals of the Educational Models and Practices Project—a \$7 M investment by the Lilly Endowment to understand the new and innovative practices in which schools are engaging—was to inform the eventual redevelopment of the Standards
 - i. We now have more data on what schools are doing than perhaps we ever had in the history of the Association
 - e. The ATS Board of Commissioners undergoes regular review of the Standards
 - i. The current Standards are too focused on specific educational practices rather than on principles that point to educational quality.
 - ii. In short, the Standards no longer reflect the broad diversity of types of school and those schools’ practices.
3. Appointment of a Task Force:
- a. A diverse 19-member Task Force, which has representation from the broad membership of the schools has been appointed to structure a process that will lead to: 1) the engagement of a broad cross-section of the membership; 2) the development of Standards based on the schools’ feedback.
4. Timeline
- a. A year of listening and getting input and feedback – today we will be hosting a focus-group from NACTS
 - i. Also subcommittees looking at critical themes: diversity, faculty, formation, embedded schools, etc.
 - b. A year of writing and development of the Standards
 - i. Themes of principles over practices
 - ii. Quality / Flexibility / Simplicity

This is the strategy for how ATS/Commission will respond to these changes as a member organization, and we are hopeful that both the support provided through the

Association and the Redeveloped Standards will provide schools with the resources they need to change faithfully in response to these current realities.

But what is theological about change? What distinguishes us from the rest of higher education that is going through these changes? What is theological about theological education?

F. Where We Find Our Hope

1. Challenge and Change / Crisis and creativity – in the middle of this environment, I see cause for hope...
 - a. In the middle of these larger vectors of change in the church and society, theological schools have not been mired in despair but have been centers of creativity.
 - b. Ed. Models
 - i. New educational models and deliveries
 1. Competency based education
 2. Online formation
 3. Theological education in prisons
 - ii. To new audiences
 1. Theological schools and degrees in Chinese, Korean, Spanish
 2. RC to diaconate and lay leaders
 - iii. Generating new partnerships
 1. With local congregations, judicatories
 2. Internationally
 3. Between schools and organizations (familiar to Field Educators)
2. Crisis and creativity should be nothing new for us as people of belief and faith
 - a. In fact, it is in times of crisis in which God's people are often at their most creative.
 - i. The exile/post-exilic period and the production of the Bible
 - ii. In the first century CE, Judaism goes through major creative reform in response to the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 AD.
 1. Re-emphasis on teaching (*torah*) of Judaism among the Pharisees and the Messianic Jews who became known as Christians.
3. Time of crisis and change is when God reminds us that God is with us, that we are not alone.
 - a. Death of Moses in Deuteronomy: "it is the LORD your God who goes with you; (who) will not fail you or forsake you" (Deut 31:6)
 - b. Jesus and the great commission: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting



Trends within the Changing Landscape of Theological Education

Association for Theological Field Education
Asheville, NC January/February 2019

THE VIEW FROM 40,000 FEET



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MISSION AND VISION



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The mission of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada is to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.

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Strengthen ***LEGACY***

Foster and Support ***INNOVATION***

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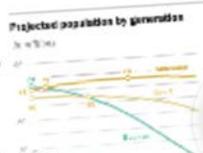
Strengthen ***LEGACY***

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CHANGE



Millennials projected to overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation



Theological Education

Latest Data on Enrollment Declines

Largest declines are in Midwest and Northeast

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Accelerated
time of change

Theological
education?



TRENDS AND CURRENT REALITIES

TRENDS AND CURRENT REALITIES

- The Shifting Model
- Programs → Delivery → New Audiences
- High Context / Deeper Context
- Serving the 21st Student
- Diverse. Local.
- Residential Theological Education

TRENDS AND CURRENT REALITIES

Other Important Themes...

- Changes in ATS Membership Schools
- Changing Nature of Faculty Work
- Student Formation

IN THE END...

