

ATS Research continues to grow

A conversation with Deborah H. C. Gin

By LISA KERN

The ATS staff—especially the ATS Research team—wishes to express their gratitude for the significant legacy that Barbara Wheeler has left them and mourns the loss of an important mentor.

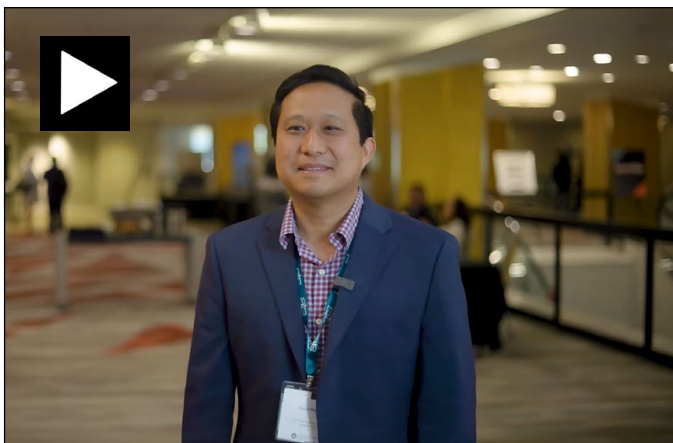
Members of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) enjoy several benefits as part of the Association, with one of the most popular being access to unique theological education research and specific institutional research not offered anywhere else. Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, answers questions about the ATS Research function.



Q How and when was the ATS research department formed?

ATS and the [Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education](#) partnered closely for decades, sharing data and findings to resource ATS schools and its leaders.

When Auburn's then president (the late Barbara Wheeler) announced her retirement, the ATS Board of Directors decided it was time to bring ATS research "in house."



David Wang, Penner Chair for the Formation of Emotionally Healthy Leaders and Associate Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, shares his thoughts on ATS research.

I was hired to launch this new function of ATS in 2014 and, along with me that year, ATS hired Jo Ann Deasy—the first two directors on staff with "research" in their titles.

Operating out of two core values, informational humility and structural hospitality, I led ATS Research toward providing more researchers with access to ATS data. Informational humility keeps our projects open to exploration and further learning—what have we not uncovered? What are underlying challenges that disaggregation will help us see? Structural hospitality provides greater access and invites additional voices so we can see a more comprehensive picture of the broad tent that is ATS. Two tangible outcomes of this approach were the updated [data-sharing policy](#) and the [data visualization tool](#).

ATS Research also built on strong descriptive data analysis provided by the team that included Chris Meinzer, Chris Olsztyn, and Alissa Horton. When I arrived, we began to ask other questions of the data, like "What

predicts high or low student debt?” or “Is change in the use of contingent faculty related to enrollment changes and/or institutional finances?” or “What predicts having to merge or close?” We are now adding machine learning approaches to data analysis, with the most recent addition of Research and Data team members Christopher The and Michael Hemenway. In addition, the Research and Data Advisory Committee meets four times a biennium and serves the Association by advising ATS staff on the identification and prioritization of research agenda topics that respond to the changing landscape of theological education.

Q How has ATS Research been involved with the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative so far?

ATS Research has been involved with *Pathways* in three areas—institutional sustainability, changing demographics, and non-degree programs. Regarding institutional sustainability, we’ve looked at identifying how to determine whether theological schools are more sustainable as a result of the initiative. We have been doing baseline research—a “before” picture—on two levels: (1) **school**—identifying the measure of financial sustainability from institutional data that schools report annually in the ATS Annual Report Form and (2) **industry**—putting higher education in conversation with theological education to better understand how issues of enrollment, finances, leadership, personnel, and other institutional structures impact the overall economics of the school and the broader industry.

Regarding the school level, the team has been iterating further on research started nearly a decade ago and almost has a tool that can identify the health of schools. We are working on ways to test the tool by applying it to other projects, and we will be doing more research to make sure it is indeed accurate. If it is, then we can

do some before/after comparisons of a whole host of things—an initiative’s impact, an intervention a school used, the impact of changes in leadership, etc.

The second research area has been identifying how institutions are increasing their capacities to attend to the changing demographics of their students. As schools look for new markets to expand their recruitment efforts, they are finding that student demographics—race, gender, age, educational generation, geographic location, urbanicity—have changed from even a decade ago and have a bearing on educational effectiveness and retention, as well as affordability, access, climate, and other aspects

of the student experience. Helping schools adapt to these new realities is a priority for the *Pathways* coordination project. We have conducted a literature review of frameworks for assessing institutional capacity for diversity and identified data we already collect that would help us assess a baseline, and identified data we still need to collect. We also conducted a focus group workshop at the *November 2023 Pathways Gathering*, where schools provided good data regarding the framework we intend to use in a larger project of all ATS schools.

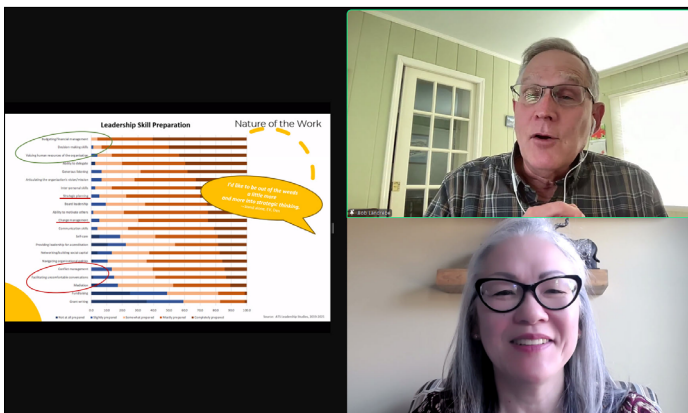


Gin leads a research discussion at the *November 2023 Pathways Gathering* in Indianapolis.

The third area, a study of non-degree programs, is couched in a larger question about the need to broaden our understanding of the ecology of those educating clergy or preparing ministers: who else are the schools serving besides degree-earning students? Like the changing demographics project, we have done literature review and identified six areas that we will study in the larger project: (1) reasons for the non-degree program, (2) target populations and recruitment strategies, (3) types of programs (certificate, license, stackable credential, etc.), (4) institutional structures (funding, overhead, partnerships, marketing strategy, etc.), (5) assessing effectiveness, and (6) design.

Q What other ATS research projects are you currently working on?

We are currently working on projects related to the Organizational and Educational Models Initiative—completing the contingent faculty project, starting a regular faculty project, and continuing to analyze the large dataset of our workforce survey. The latter project has yielded very interesting data about changes to the religious workforce regarding where they work and what they need for their work since the last survey five years ago. The implication of this last question raises important questions for theological schools and our industry, such as whether what schools offer is aligned with what the workforce needs. Schools seem to be offering a curriculum that really helps future faculty, but not necessarily people who work in ministry.



Gin and Bob Landrebe, former senior vice president and chief operating officer of Asbury Theological Seminary, discuss findings from the ATS Leadership Study on Financial Leaders in Theological Education during a recent research webinar.

Q What events has ATS hosted for researchers in the field?

In addition to webinars for ATS school personnel in specific roles to explore the results of the leadership studies, we've held two in-person gatherings to discuss research on theological education.

We invited senior leaders, educational practitioners, and institutional researchers to join the Research Advisory Committee meeting this past May and had robust conversation around some of the data and findings from the



Participants at the ATS *Pathways* Preconference to Society for the Scientific Study of Religion/Religious Research Association Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh earlier this month discuss their research topics.

Workforce Survey and the Contingent Faculty Survey. What I loved about that meeting is that we intentionally invited researchers from a variety of fields—not only the sociology of religion, but also anthropology, psychology, ethics, and political science.

Earlier this month, we held a *Pathways* preconference leading up to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion/Religious Research Association's annual meeting to foster a learning community among grantees and resource the wider community of schools. We invited participants to engage in discussions around how individual research projects connect to the study of theological education and to network with others who may be considering conducting research related to theological education topics that may not be exclusive to *Pathways* research.

We only started having these gatherings during the last academic year, but we look forward to continuing to build momentum toward this vision to develop a field of the study of theological education.

Visit the ATS website to learn more about the ATS Research function and the expanding resources it offers to member schools.



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