

Listening project leads to new opportunities for ATS financial officers

BY LAUREN JOHNSON

Financial officers in theological schools do more than wield the purse strings. They work with senior administrators to maintain economic equilibrium and maximize the use of available resources in the pursuit of institutional mission and goals. Since 2003, financial officers from ATS member schools have gathered regularly for the stated purpose of building a collegial network, participating in educational and professional development opportunities, and sharing best practices, resources, and peer learnings to support their critical work and role in theological education.

In the summer of 2024, as part of the Association's ongoing efforts to ensure its learning opportunities and programming are relevant and responsive to the changing realities and contexts of a diverse membership, the ATS leadership development team decided to engage in a listening project. The project involved one-on-one conversations and interactions with many CFOs and financial officers from a diverse range of ATS member schools to hear what they need most to support the work they are doing. The project was led by Chelsea Yarborough, ATS associate director of leadership programming, and resulted in the identification of many key topics and common threads that emerged consistently from the input received from conversation partners.



The 2024–25 CFOs Webinar Series—a four-part webinar series that examines various topics relevant to CFOs and other business and financial personnel at theological schools—is the first initiative to grow directly out of these listening conversations. The webinar series kicked off in October 2024, with the *ATS Research Webinar on Chief Financial Officers*, facilitated by Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development. The focus of this first webinar was the discussion of the CFOs Leadership Study. The findings of the leadership study were discussed, as well as how those findings are applicable to the workplace for CFOs and other business/financial professionals.

The second webinar in the series, *Nourishing the Ecosystem: Strategic Communication Beyond the Silo*, was held in November 2024. The focus of the webinar was using strategic communication to discuss the work that is being done, both within and among schools. The third webinar, *Exploring Sustainable Economic Models: Insights from ATS CFOs*, took place earlier this month. The focus

of this webinar was the discussion of sustainable economic models for schools in an unpredictable and ever-changing educational landscape. Different strategies to ensure financial viability were discussed. The fourth and final webinar in the series, focusing on the possibilities of shared services, is scheduled for April 2025.

The reformation of the ATS CFO Steering Committee was another result of the listening conversations conducted by Yarborough. The new steering committee consists of nine representatives from diverse ATS member schools and meets monthly. The inaugural committee meeting took place on December 18, 2024. Committee members were engaged and continue to approach each meeting with enthusiasm and valuable insight. Two of the committee members have already served as speakers for the CFOs Webinar Series.

One of the primary aims of the CFO Steering Committee is to plan the annual in-person gathering. This year's gathering will be November 11–13, 2025. The steering committee, along with the leadership development team, will plan and imagine the gathering together. This will include identifying workshop and plenary speakers, topics to be discussed, and conference themes. Despite the steering committee being newly formed, it already shows great promise. All committee members bring their own unique perspectives to the meetings, which have already produced generative and meaningful dialogue.

As the committee continues to grow and work toward the support of this community of practice for financial officers at ATS schools, please consider joining an upcoming webinar or in-person event!



Lauren Johnson is Program Assistant for Leadership Development at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.