Unprecedented number of changes occurring among ATS school leaders

By Frank M. Yamada

There have recently been an unprecedented number of changes among chief executive officers and chief academic officers in The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). During the past five years, ATS schools have seen the most transitions in these top two administrative leadership positions in the Association's 105-year history.

I have been quoted as saying that ATS member schools are in the middle of profound and rapid changes. Prior to the global pandemic, ATS schools had been changing in their organizational/financial models, in their educational deliveries, and in the types of students whom they are serving. The pandemic has accelerated many of these changes.

Before and after the global pandemic

Every year, ATS compiles and publishes an article in *Colloquy Online* that identifies the changes among CEOs and CAOs at member schools. Over time, these articles have gone from listing names, titles, schools, and write-ups on a few new leaders to lengthy lists simply identifying the schools and their new leaders. There are now too many new presidents and deans to do bios on each leadership transition.

Like the changes in theological schools, the global pandemic has accelerated what was already a significant increase in the number of leadership transitions. In the September 2021 issue of *Colloquy Online*, there were 100 new CEOs and CAOs at 84 ATS schools. In the September 2022 issue, there were 83 new CEOs and CAOs at 74 schools. The articles in both issues—which ran during the first two years of the global pandemic—clearly illustrate the dramatic increase in leadership transitions in ATS schools during that time.

Tom Tanner, retired director of accreditation at ATS, has looked more closely at these transitions from the past five years. Here are his findings:

- Since 2017, there have been 406 changes among CEOs and CAOs, affecting 214 different ATS institutions or three-fourths (76%) of the 280 member schools. Among these changes, 41% of schools made multiple changes, and almost one-third (32%) had changes in both positions during this five-year period. There were more transitions in the academic deanships. Among the 406 changes, 43% were CEOs and 57% were CAOs.
- The pace of change of these transitions has doubled during the pandemic. Of the 406 changes, 138 occurred in the two and a half years before the

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pandemic. There were 268 changes in the two and a half years after the onset of the global health crisis—two-thirds of these leadership changes have happened since early 2020. Prior to the pandemic, schools had announced, on average, about 55 new leaders per year. Schools are reporting 107 CEO or CAO transitions per year since the pandemic—an unbelievable pace of change for ATS member schools.

- These newly appointed leaders mirror the diversity of ATS schools regarding ecclesial family or type of school. Evangelical Protestant schools accounted for 46% of the changes, 32% were among Mainline Protestants, and 22% were from Roman Catholic or Orthodox schools. These percentages are consistent with the number of ATS schools from these respective ecclesial traditions. No significant differences in percentages were noted for institutional characteristics such as structure (freestanding or embedded) or the size of the school in terms of enrollments. Canadian schools, however, saw an increased rate in the number of changes before and since the pandemic (24% pre- and 76% post-pandemic) relative to the larger organizational sample.

- The demographics among these personnel changes are also consistent with the trends prior to the pandemic. Of the 406 changes, almost one-fourth (24%) of the CEOs and CAOs were women and 31% were people of color. These data are consistent with the number of women and people of color who were serving ATS schools prior to the pandemic. One-fourth (25%) of the leaders were under 50 years of age with an average age of 58 for CEOs and 55 for CAOs.

"The Great Resignation"?

The significant increase in the number of changes represented at ATS schools during the global pandemic is consistent with leadership transitions in the broader landscape of higher education (see "College Administrator Data/Turnover Rates: 2018–Present," in *higherEd direct)*. While more study is needed, there is correlation with what scholars and journalists have called the "Great Resignation." This parallel "should not be too surprising, given that education is the third largest area (the first two being hospitality and healthcare) impacted by this mass 'resignation,'" said Tanner. "These current data do not give the reason for these transitions—resignation, retirement, reshuffling (from one school to another), or moving back to the faculty or previous forms of employment," he said. For trends in higher education, see the recent survey conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources in which more than half of the respondents said they were looking for other forms of employment.

The global pandemic altered the ways people work and what they valued in the workplace. It was a time of significant disruption for most industries, including higher education. During that time, people re-evaluated how they were living, how they were working, and the things about which they care most. This period might be relabeled as a time of "Great Discernment."

Further research

Recent research ATS has conducted on CEOs and CAOs may point to some of the factors that contributed to the increase in leadership transitions during the pandemic (see the ATS research study articles "ATS Study of CEOs in Theological Schools" and "ATS Leadership Education Studies Project: Chief Academic Officers"). In two separate surveys of presidents and deans, there were some common themes about work-related stresses. For CEOs, the top three were: (1) "solving enrollment challenges," (2) "finding a sustainable business model," and (3) "dealing with difficult employees and colleagues." CAOs overlapped in two of these areas: (1) "dealing with difficult employees and colleagues"—the second highest for deans

and (2) "solving enrollment challenges"—the third highest. The highest cause of stress for academic deans was "balancing demanding work hours with other responsibilities."

Many of these areas of stress would have been heightened during the global pandemic. CEOs commented on how strategic planning—where mission/enrollments and finances converge—became a seemingly endless set of pivots, which generates stress on any work culture. These rapid changes, undoubtedly, affected the morale of those who taught, learned, and worked in theological schools. For CAOs, there was no balance in their demanding workload as faculty shifted to teaching through distance education, as students relocated, and as commencements moved online.

Decision-fatigue was also a considerable source of stress. CEOs described the continuous set of decisions required to ensure the safety and health of students, faculty, and staff. Negotiating and complying with federal, state, and local requirements—combined with forecasting the short-term and long-term needs and restrictions for housing, facilities, and online instruction—made for a complex web of timely and important decisions. It would not be a surprise for future research to find that leaders within ATS schools took this time of great discernment to pause for some well-deserved rest or to retire into the next stage of their lives.

These data represent a significant sample for future study, but important questions remain. From where did these new leaders come—the academy, internally from the school, other sectors of higher education, business, communities of faith, or denominational positions? We also do not know the reason for the previous leaders' departures. Did the stress from the pandemic and the decision-fatigue that came with leadership positions influence the tenure of leaders? What were the motivations for these newly appointed leaders to seek out these positions? Was the high number of transitions evidence of a generational transition from the Baby Boomers to Generation X or to the Millennials? These, and other important questions, will drive research on this unprecedented group of leaders in ATS schools.

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Frank M. Yamada *is Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*