

Auburn *Studies*

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**Auburn
Theological
Seminary**

Auburn Theological Seminary is a visionary place of learning and leadership, with storied roots stretching ten generations into the past, and a mission to heal the world reaching ten generations into the future.

Active across the nation, Auburn offers transformative, accessible education that goes beyond degrees, focusing on practical skills for emerging and established leaders of all faiths. Our programs in leadership development, research, and narrative change equip leaders to foster justice, bridge divides, and inspire healing in their communities.

At Auburn, we believe in the power of education, collective action and fearless dialogue to bring about a healed world. We cultivate an inclusive space where every voice is heard, respected, and empowered. We recognize that in order to be an influential leader, one must also be a lifetime learner. We view differences as opportunities to expand our understanding—not drift further apart. And together, we work to build a future where everyone leads with love.

Pedagogical Imagination in ATS Schools

There is a temptation, when we think about the state of theological education in North America, to reach for the same tools we have always carried. We measure enrollment. We track debt. We count the number of students of color in a classroom against the number of faculty who look like them. We note what denominations are growing and which are not.

These are not unimportant questions. Auburn has asked them, documented them, grappled with them. For the work that actually changes the character of a school, the work that happens between a teacher and a student in the space where formation occurs, these questions may not be the most urgent or even necessary.

What Dr. Jodi L. Porter has done in this report is something genuinely new for the study of theological education. Previous Auburn Studies have documented the diversity of our member schools. They have named the ecclesial differences that make a single standard for this work nearly impossible. They have wrestled with the gap between who shows up for seminary and who teaches at the institution. That work matters, and it laid the ground for what you are about to read. But Dr. Porter's study is the first in our tradition to move toward the question with generative intent: not just what are the differences across ATS schools, but how are those schools thinking pedagogically to meet this moment? What is the lived practice of theological educators who are trying to build classrooms where all students belong and can flourish?

That is a different kind of question. It requires a different kind of method to answer it faithfully.

Diversity.

What stories do we already have to tell? What is already working? What might be possible if we let that become our starting place? How are we living into God's grace and abundance?



Illustrations by Adriana Contreras Correal,
founder of Mare Verso Creative.

MARE creative
VERSO
est. 2019

I should say something, first, about the word “diversity” itself. In this political moment, it has become contested, weaponized, stripped of meaning, or dropped from institutional language altogether out of self-protection. But even setting aside the politics, there is something worth pausing on in the Latin root of the word, *diversitas*. To diverge. To turn away. At its root, diversity names a turning away from one another. It is a description of a condition and a moment, but it is not a destination.

And it is worth asking: is that really what we are after in theological education? For those like myself from historically marginalized groups, it is an existentially necessary move. And at the same time, what if there was something about the ways my own community gathers in circle, every member looking eye-to-eye with others, that might be informative about how we might better come to know each other as the Body of Christ?

What Dr. Porter offers through the Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI) method is a different orientation entirely. It is not about diverging. Rather, she offers us a turning toward, a way of sitting in circle. The conversation circles that structured her research across twenty-five ATS schools in the United States and Canada are rooted in ancient wisdom—the kind that undergirds IAI and long predates any accreditation standard or diversity initiative. In that method, knowledge does not get extracted from communities. It grows up from within them. Guided by Terry LeBlanc, founding Chair and Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, and developed in the oral tradition he has carried and refined, IAI begins with asset-based questions: What is working? What is life-giving? What do we already know how to do? And Dr. Porter situates her knowledge from that place. The four-phase movement through Discovery, Dreaming,

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Design, and Delivery was used with permission from the community, in relationship with NAIITS, and adapted with integrity to the specific questions of theological education across the broadest ecclesial difference in the field. The result is a methodology that does not just study pedagogical imagination. It enacts it.

What Dr. Porter found, sitting in a circle with sixty-two CAOs and faculty from twenty-five schools across Canada and the United States, is worth naming. These are the top-level findings that emerge from the study:

- **Relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies.** Faculty across both countries are redesigning classrooms, physically and conceptually, around circle, mutuality, and trust. The presence of students from different cultural backgrounds is not managed. It is treated as a generative resource for learning.
- **Localized pedagogies.** Schools are contextualizing curriculum to students' cultural locations and communities of service. In Canada, this work is being shaped by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action in ways instructive for schools on both sides of the border.
- **Flexible, student-centered, and reflective learning design.** Faculty are redesigning syllabi, assessments, and even grading practices to honor what students know and not just what they can perform—making space for oral learners, multilingual students, rural and multi-vocational pastors, and students reconstructing their faith.
- **Trauma-informed pedagogies.** Many students arrive carrying

wounds. Faculty are creating spaces for conversations that were once avoided, treating responsiveness and care as integral to pedagogy rather than as interruptions to it.

- **Structural supports for learning.**

The institutional infrastructure of accessibility, mentorship, technology, and communal life is being reimagined to make belonging possible not just in theory but in practice.

While we are not at a post-denominational moment and the ecclesial differences across ATS schools are real, something is shifting. The changing makeup of student bodies, the rise of distance education, the irreversible diversification of North American Christianity, and the pedagogical experiments documented in these pages all point toward a field that is, at its best, beginning to reimagine itself from the ground up. The question of how we teach is becoming inseparable from the question of who we are teaching and why.

Dr. Porter frames this work through the lens of *hesed*, God's steadfast love, and the perichoretic dance of the Trinity as a model for what education can become when it is genuinely relational, mutual, and formational. It is a fitting frame. The most faithful thing a theological school can do in this moment is to ask what it means to lead with love in the classroom, in the curriculum, in the community of formation we call a seminary.

This research does not stand apart from the communities it studies but grows up from within them. It offers not a list of best practices to import wholesale, but a method, Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry, that any school

can adapt to its own context for its own discernment.

Read it carefully. Read it with your faculty and your deans. And then ask, in the spirit of IAI: What stories do we already have to tell? What is already working? What might be possible if we let that become our starting place? How are we living into God's grace and abundance? As leaders of theological institutions, may we respond faithfully to these questions.



Rev. Patrick B. Reyes

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Pedagogical Imagination

Shaping the Practice of Teaching for Belonging and Flourishing in Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Member Schools

Jodi L. Porter, Ed.D.

Jodi L. Porter, Ed.D., has a passion for nurturing diverse voices for church leadership. She first partnered with the ATS's Mary Young, Jo Ann Deasy, and Debbie Gin to structure a tool that ATS member schools can use to define constructive approaches to diversity. In 2025-2026, while a Barbara Wheeler Research Fellow with Auburn Theological Seminary in NYC, Jodi completed this project on pedagogical imagination for serving diverse student populations well. Jodi holds an Ed.D. in Leadership and Learning in Organizations (LLO) from Peabody College, Vanderbilt University; an M.Th. in Applied (Practical) Theology from Regent's Park College, University of Oxford; and a B.A. in Oxbridge Honors Religious Studies from William Jewell College. Alongside her consulting business, she has served at Acadia Divinity College, the Forum for Theological Exploration, Baylor University, Duke University Divinity School, and Harvard Medical School. Jodi also serves as Board Secretary for the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM).

A word from the author

In February 2026, I enjoyed the humbling honor of joining the community of AETH, the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana, for their 35th anniversary celebration of Justo González's *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Entitled "*Mañana* from a New Today," the event welcomed pastors, students, professors, administrators, and friends to the campus of Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, GA. My task: to serve on a panel as the sole non-Hispanic voice, noticing and advancing the importance of Dr. González's work not only for Latiné Christian practice but also for the broader industry of theological education.

By way of clarifying my own contexts and the position I bring to this work, I share here an edited version of the remarks I shared that day.

Hoy y Mañana: Hesed as Praxis

Dr. González encouraged his readers that "theology is best done with dirt under one's fingernails" (1990, p. 129), highlighting the identity of Latiné believers in the Americas whose daily struggle involves literally working the land. I cannot claim that position in my own theologizing. Nonetheless, I'd like to think I have great empathy and respect for it.

My ancestors came from the Scandinavian countries, and Germany, and Wales, and Ireland, to name a few of their European homes. And, I'm told, they came from the Trail of Tears, though they were too afraid to preserve that part of our story in confident detail. I have Indigenous ancestors, but I have lived the life of a settler.

I come from north central Missouri, the child of an agronomist who left his family farm to improve the corn industry across the American Midwest – and we pray not at the cost of local small farms. My father's family lived in poverty, but I've lived in privilege.

And my earliest memory is in a corn field, sitting on an irrigation pipe (ironically the same item that Dr. González used as a metaphor to redescribe the "pipeline" of education for Christian ministry), squishing the mud between my two-year-old toes. Now that my dad has been deceased for 16 years, some of my fondest memories are in the corn field, working for the seed companies he led, summer after very hot summer from the ages of 14 to 23. I have worked long hours in the corn fields and couldn't scrub my nails clean, but I can't claim I've been oppressed. I've been the oppressor.

I've benefited from the white, Eurocentric, male-dominated culture in which I've lived. Our family doesn't want for anything. We "own" property, I am a graduate of top-tier schools and work in the hallowed halls of higher education. I have quickly forgotten my family's histories or conveniently ignored those of others. That history is part of the position I bring to any work I do on the topic of diversity.

Yet after a journey of service and growth in diverse contexts over the past 30 years, I hope I now also bring awareness, and empathy, and hope. I can see the dirt under the fingernails. I know where it's come from and why it's there. And it's with that perspective that I approach my fields of practical theology and organizational leadership.

I confess: I wish I had read *Mañana* years ago. When it was first published in 1990, I would have been preparing to enter high school in Carrollton, MO. A "star pupil" of the Sunday School at our small, Southern Baptist church. And just starting to wonder what I wanted to be when I grew up. By 1996, I was in college, pursuing a major in religious studies to learn "why I believe what I believe." Maybe I wouldn't have been ready for *Mañana* at that time. Almost everyone in our rural town looked like us, and we simply didn't "see" those who didn't. Some had more means than others, but we were focused on building our own. Our family's views were fundamentalist and escapist, not ecumenical or material.

And let me hasten to add: my family, and my church, taught me to love Jesus. They taught me to love others. They taught me faithful life lessons. For that, I'm forever grateful. And yet, I had much more to learn about the Jesus Way (as my First Nations friends call it) and still do. *Mañana* has been an accessible, beautiful gift for fellow pilgrims like me – not Hispanic yet committed to God's best for all of

God's creation, in all our diversity.

I want to honor Dr. González by helping this group imagine together how to put his wisdom into practice. What can it look like to do theology informed by the "dirt under one's fingernails" – whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor? What can it look like in our churches, in our theological schools, in our communities? What are some practical frameworks that can help us embody God's word where we find ourselves today? I will lean into what Dr. González called "a new understanding of orthodoxy as closely linked to orthopraxis" (1990, p. 50), or of doctrine linked to practice. And of "reading the Bible in the vocative," meaning that "the text that we address addresses us in return" (1990, p. 86).

When I worked at Duke Divinity School in the late 2000s, I helped lead our Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. DYA was a program for high school youth to spend two weeks at the seminary, diving more deeply into the Christian story and discerning God's calls on their lives. That summer, one of our speakers was the Rev. Dr. Jo Bailey Wells (now "the Rt. Rev." as she serves as a bishop in the Anglican church in England). And she drew our attention to Psalm 136.

This is the Psalm that tells the story of Israel's history, punctuated with the consistent refrain, "for his steadfast love endures forever." That phrase – *steadfast love* – represents the Hebrew term *hesed*. It also, Dr. González pointed out, names our God as a living God who acts in history (1990, pp. 92-95) and hints at the Trinitarian God who constitutes the self-giving love that we too should embody (1990, pp. 111-115).

That day at DYA, Dr. Bailey Wells invited us to find our story in Israel's story. To name where we have seen God at work in our lives. And to stay

"We need to recognize that the sources of knowledge that victims or survivors produce won't always be in the form of a book."

—Canada, ATS Roman Catholic school

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But maybe it's easier to imagine us
joining in a dance of self-giving.

focused on that truth that God is with us, helping us write our stories. I don't recall for certain, but I suspect she also emphasized not just our individual stories but those of our communities. God's steadfast love is the refrain not only for ancient Israel but also for Christianity right now – and not of conservative or liberal Christianity, but of the ecumenical Christianity Dr. González envisioned 35 years ago. Of the *Mañana* we still see only partly but always, even now, are invited to join.

The fancy theological term that expands on the idea of God's *hesed* (God's steadfast love) in the shape of the Trinity is *perichoresis*. It's a word I first learned from one of my Oxford tutors for my master's program. Often it is translated or understood as the "divine dance" among the three persons of the Trinity. As I read *Mañana*, I was reminded again: It is hard to wrap our heads around a Trinitarian God, much less the idea of connecting with that God. But maybe it's easier to imagine us joining in a dance of self-giving. We can suggest creative ways of joining God's dance as we live in the world.

And yet, as someone who identifies as Type A, or probably a "1" on the

Enneagram, I am a planner. I need some practical frameworks to help inspire and organize my imagination for joining in this dance. As an organizational leader, I've noticed others find practical frameworks helpful too. For sketching vision for a whole group. Practical frameworks can help us recognize God's *hesed* through community analysis, empowerment, and dismantling of injustices, even if gradually. Theological schools across the ecology are utilizing frameworks for their work such as Marshall Ganz's "public narrative" framework (Leading Change Network et al., n.d.), Stephen B. Bevans's "praxis" version of the pastoral cycle (2002), and improvement cycles like Charles Maguerez's Arch (Reisdorfer et al., 2024) and Dr. Fernando Cascante's Model for Advancing Racial and Ethnic Diversity (MARED; Cascante-Gómez, 2008). These frameworks welcome more diverse learners into classrooms and prepare them to serve in more diverse ministry contexts.

Let's discuss the details of some of these frameworks now, imagining how they might support work in your own contexts. And if you have other frameworks you enjoy using, I'd love to learn more about them.

Barbara Wheeler Fellowship

It is with this spirit of *hesed* and a commitment to practical next steps that I approached this Barbara Wheeler Research Fellowship. Over my two decades of work in theological education, I have learned from BIPOC-led and Indigenous-led organizations how to hear stories. How to tell stories. And how to utilize simple frameworks to help all of us imagine our next most faithful steps. I especially credit the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) and NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community for sharing their wisdom with me. It continues to be my humble honor to walk alongside traditionally underrepresented leaders for the church and help elevate their voices across the industry.

More than 35 years ago, Dr. González wrote *Mañana* as his volume of historical theology that contains the encouragement, even the mandate, to embody robust, earthy, ecumenical Christianity. I wonder where society might be today, especially socio-politically, if more of us had noticed and heeded that mandate so long ago. But perhaps we can wonder instead: where might we be if all of us honor that mandate today? *Y mañana?*

Introduction

Graduate theological schools across North America are navigating a season of profound demographic, cultural, and institutional change. Students now arrive in classrooms carrying richly diverse racial and ethnic identities, languages, migration stories, denominational traditions, learning needs, experiences of trauma or marginalization, and vocational aspirations. At the same time, theological schools are wrestling with broader social and political pressures surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, including increasing polarization regarding the meaning and purpose of these efforts. Amid these realities, faculty and institutional leaders continue asking a pressing practical question: What kinds of pedagogical spaces best cultivate belonging, flourishing, and faithful formation for all students preparing to serve in an increasingly diverse world?

This report emerged from that question.¹ Building on my earlier research with the ATS¹ Cultivating Educational Capacity (CEC) initiative, this study shifted attention from institutional definitions and frameworks for diversity work toward the lived practices of teaching and learning. Through conversation circles with CAOs and faculty from 25 ATS member schools across Canada and the United States, the project explored what I call “pedagogical imagination”: the creative, relational, and formational practices theological educators are developing to serve diverse student populations with wisdom, humility, and care.

The study intentionally employed aspects of Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI) not only as a method for gathering and synthesizing stories, but also as a practical model that schools themselves might adapt for their own institutional discernment and change efforts. By centering storytelling, identifying common strengths across diverse contexts, and moving deliberately from discovery toward design and delivery, the project demonstrated how asset-based communal reflection can help schools imagine constructive next steps.

The project also aimed to model research itself as a form of community formation and praxis rather than simply a mechanism for data collection or evaluation. The conversation circles became spaces where

participants learned from one another in real time, surfaced shared challenges, tested language and ideas together, and generated practical pedagogical insights that could immediately inform their work. In this sense, the study functioned not only as research on pedagogy but also as a modest community of practice in action. Rather than producing abstract conclusions detached from institutional life, the project sought to connect research directly to ongoing experimentation, reflection, and practical steps within theological schools. What emerged through these conversations was not a list of pedagogical best practices but rather a shared commitment to discern together how theological education might more faithfully embody belonging, flourishing, and steadfast love in a diverse and changing world.

The report begins with organizational context and history, focusing on diversity as an ATS value. It then describes my first study, which engaged with the ATS CEC initiative, and the resulting tool I built to support member schools as they define and measure diversity efforts in their own contexts. As I turn to this study on pedagogical imagination, I update the organizational context with diversity-related initiatives that unfolded at ATS since 2022, when I completed the first study. These include a comprehensive survey for deans and appreciative diversity consultations with select schools. Guided by Terry LeBlanc and with his permission, I then detail the differences between Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI). For the remainder of the report, I utilize IAI to organize insights from the stories that emerged during the study, through the movements of Discovery, Dreaming, and Design and Delivery. Discovery includes themes and core values, Dreaming includes images sketched by a graphic facilitator in response to the recordings of the conversation circles, and Design and Delivery illustrates the use of a matrix to operationalize next steps. The report also includes highlights from participating faculty and schools through anonymized quotations and brief school vignettes.

I invite readers to engage with the organizational context and history, the two studies, and the pedagogical stories and sketches in ways that will most spark pedagogical imagination and faithful next steps at your theological institutions.

1. The Association of Theological Schools and The Commission on Accrediting (ATS).

Diversity as an ATS Value

ATS (2021b) comprises over 270 graduate schools of theology in the United States and Canada. The organization helps improve and enhance theological schools for the benefit of faith communities and the broader public through its two corporations, the Commission on Accrediting and the Association. The Commission establishes standards for accreditation and approves degree programs, while the Association pursues research and provides resources for member schools. Diversity is one of the four core values that ATS and its schools currently espouse (ATS, 2021b). The others include quality and improvement, collegiality, and leadership. Alongside these core values, ATS and its schools also embrace supplemental values, including a commitment to justice in society, institutions, and organizational life.²

Navigating diversities well within theological schools can be an elusive task, but it is a goal of paramount importance. As the United States quickly diversifies, ATS schools are experiencing an increase in the diversity of their student bodies (Frank Yamada, 2017). Students of color have accounted for the largest share of enrollment growth, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of total enrollment, across ATS schools (ATS Commission on Accrediting, 2012). Meanwhile, as grant-funded studies are beginning to imagine ways theological schools might respond (Scharen, 2019; Tomlin, 2018; Woodward, 2019), the industry still harbors persistent inequities involving Black persons, Indigenous persons, and Persons of Color (BIPOC).

Considering industry trends, student populations at ATS evangelical schools tend to overrepresent BIPOC, while faculty populations at those same schools tend to underrepresent them. Consequently, students of color at these schools likely are not receiving the role modeling and relationship building they need with faculty of color (J. Deasy & D. H. C. Gin, personal communication, May 25, 2021; Gin, 2018). Even more significantly, across all theological schools, the percentages of Black and Latiné enrollments and graduates continue to be very small compared to demographic realities, and schools often have not created sufficient conditions for scholars of color to thrive (Atwaters & Reyes, 2018).

The organizational context of ATS is complex, so ATS presently does not legislate a single set of standards for

the value of diversity. Because approximately 69% of ATS schools in the U.S. are predominantly white theological institutions (PWTIs) and 20% are historically majority-minority theological institutions (ATS, 2021a), ATS must serve schools with different histories and needs with respect to diversity and justice. Further, since 45% of ATS schools are evangelical Protestant and 32% are mainline Protestant (Karnadi, 2020), ATS must navigate different institutional ecclesial commitments that may take different or even opposing theological and political perspectives on diversity work (Cannon & Smith, 2019; Compton, 2020; Engbretson, 2022; Houston & Todd, 2013).

The challenging, ongoing work of determining how best to help schools combine the values of diversity and justice shows in a recent revision of accreditation standards. In the previous 2010 Standards (ATS, 2010), ATS took a specific approach, asking schools to reflect on awareness, representation, and sensitivity regarding racial and ethnic diversity (Standard 2.5). In the newly-adopted 2020 Standards (ATS, 2020), ATS took a general approach, asking schools to define and pursue diversity in ways consistent with their contexts (Standard 1.5). These new standards allow schools to think about diversity in broad ways that may not engage justice, even though ATS provides self-study ideas to prompt reflection on racial and ethnic inequities (ATS, 2020). Schools can satisfy the new standards by focusing on any type of diversity, such as theological or geographical diversity, while overlooking what may be more pressing issues of justice.

As they work on projects that affect all ATS schools, such as accreditation standards, ATS has come to believe this general approach to diversity will be most constructive. And in the current political landscape, it has been essential. During the second Trump administration, ATS has supported member schools – particularly those in the United States – to follow federal mandates regarding DEI-related initiatives. As of June 2026, while the Department of Education dropped its legal effort to withdraw funding from K-12 schools, colleges, and universities with diversity initiatives, the Department of Justice memorandum (issued July 29, 2025) remains in effect. That memo requires institutions not to engage in “unlawful discrimination” if they receive federal funding (F. Yamada, communication to ATS schools, February 24, 2026).

2. See www.ats.edu/About-ATS.

“We are trying to develop institutional processes and culture that allow faculty, staff, and students to cultivate a willingness to fail publicly, because when you’re wanting to grow in response to diversity, failing will be part of the experience.”

—Canada, ATS Roman Catholic school

The work of CORE

The Association has offered diversity-related programming for more than 30 years through CORE, initially the Committee on Race and Ethnicity and now the Committee on Relational Engagement. CORE offered three phases of programming from 2000-2016, focused particularly on racial and ethnic diversity. In their 2016 evaluation of programming (Aleshire et al., 2017), they noticed participants perceived the institutional impact of CORE programming differently depending upon their race or ethnicity. For CORE Phase 1 (2000-2005), white respondents felt their participation had (a) led to institutional change and (b) led to change that had been significant and lasting, and they did so to a much greater extent than did respondents of African, Asian, or Latiné descent. For CORE Phase 3 (2010-2014), white respondents and respondents of Asian descent felt programming had led to institutional change, while those of African or Latiné descent felt it had not. At the conclusion of the 2016 evaluation process, ATS determined it may be helpful to establish a definition of success in such diversity efforts and create a related tool (Aleshire et al., 2017). How to define and measure success in diversity, and whether definitions of success involved justice, remained unclear.

Prior to the advent of the second Trump administration, ATS administered a Strategic Priorities survey (Gin, 2019) to the ATS Board of Directors, ATS Board of Commissioners, presidents and deans at all ATS schools, and to a random sample of faculty and non-cabinet administrators, receiving an 83% institution response rate. The results indicated most schools were open to ATS efforts regarding diversity. When asked what diversity topics ATS should emphasize, the top two categories that respondents suggested were race/ethnicity and systemic issues. Only 3% of respondents said ATS should be aware of conservative views on diversity held by evangelical schools due to their constituencies, views that may prefer a general approach to diversity rather than a focus on justice.

The Cultivating Educational Capacity (CEC) initiative took place between 2018 and 2021 at 18 schools interested in improving their educational effectiveness regarding racial and ethnic students, either via developing capacity to educate racial and ethnic students more effectively or by working on educational practices with white students to prepare them for ministry in a multiracial world (ATS, 2019b). The initiative involved project teams of administrators, faculty, and students at each participating school. It concluded with the Virtual 2021 Dissemination Conference, during which CEC schools shared their strategies with each other and additional ATS member schools, emphasizing good practices that they learned from their projects.

In 2021, I partnered with ATS to complete a research project focused on combining the values of diversity and justice across the industry of theological education. The project was a quality improvement study that examined the CEC initiative to provide insights regarding diversity work at nine participating CEC schools and other interested ATS member schools. It resulted in a tool utilized by ATS member schools aiming to meet the flexible accreditation standards (Huffman, 2023). It also functioned as an important frame for a 2025-2026 comprehensive ATS survey on demographic change (D. H. C. Gin, personal communication, April 23, 2026). I will elaborate more about the study to share the tool with a broader audience and describe my related study on pedagogies, as a Barbara Wheeler Fellow, as an extension of that work.

Navigating diversities well within theological schools can be an elusive task, but it is a goal of paramount importance.

Cultivating Educational Capacity

At the time of my first study, the Cultivating Educational Capacity (CEC) initiative was the most recent iteration of diversity-related ATS programming (CEC; ATS, 2019b; J. Deasy & D. H. C. Gin, personal communication, June 9, 2021; J. Deasy et al., personal communication, June 23, 2021; M. Young, personal communication, June 16, 2021). The project did not ask questions about justice per se, though its emphases on educational effectiveness and multicultural awareness converged with such questions. Accepted proposals included topics ranging from advancing intercultural awareness to wrestling with complicity with slavery. This CEC initiative intersected with the work of ATS's ongoing CORE subgroups, one working on definitions of success and one revising current ATS resources on diversity (ATS, 2019a).

Through the lens of the CEC initiative, I explored whether and how ATS and its member schools might improve efforts regarding diversity and justice. I investigated two core questions:

- In what ways are CEC schools defining and measuring institutional change through their efforts regarding racial and ethnic diversity?
- How and why are CEC projects and their institutions engaging with matters of social justice regarding racial and ethnic diversity?

Because I presumed the contexts for diversity work are different among predominantly white theological institutions, historically Black theological schools, and Asian- or Latiné-serving schools (as do the new ATS Standards; ATS, 2020), I focused the study on the type of institution that still comprises most of ATS and perhaps has the most work to do to alleviate inequities: predominantly white theological institutions (PWTIs).³ In addition, because evangelical and mainline traditions often approach justice differently (Cannon & Smith, 2019; Compton, 2020; Engbretson, 2022; Houston & Todd,

2013), I tracked commonalities and differences across these two ecclesial families.

The study used a mixed-methods design focused on the nine CEC schools (of 18) that identified as PWTIs located in the United States. In the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022, I studied final CEC reports submitted by the schools to ATS, designed and administered a survey, and facilitated focus groups by ecclesial family (evangelical and mainline). I triangulated findings across all three instruments and analyzed results by ecclesial family.

Key findings included:

- CEC schools have unique contexts and opportunities for diversity work.
- CEC schools are engaging broadly with institution-wide diversity work yet may lack consistent metric definitions and alignment with metrics.
- CEC schools are engaging broadly with justice concerns yet may not have clear definitions and/or rationale for justice work.
- CEC schools expressed struggles mobilizing for change and appreciate supports to do so.

The study results supplemented the CEC good practices that emerged via the Virtual 2021 Dissemination Conference with frameworks, findings, and recommendations aimed toward evidence-based, reflective insights and resources that ATS could offer to member schools. I argued that while the industry may be starting to move away from its currently dominant, white-mainstream professional approach to theological education (Aleshire in Smith et al., 2018), it has a long way still to go. Further, due not only to changing demographics but also to persistent inequities in the field, schools need more support from ATS to advance justice.

3. Institutions self-report their primary racial/ethnic composition of their student bodies (ATS 2021a). This study included CEC schools that identified their primary composition as "White" on the 2020-2021 ATS Data Tables."

Literature Review

I rooted this first study in a comprehensive literature review that revealed three pertinent themes. First, diversity work effects the most change if institutions approach it at the systemic, institution-wide level rather than at a siloed, departmental level (Aleshire, 2009; Dwertmann et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2010; Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018; Smith, 2020). Second, imperatives for diversity work must include not only the instrumental, or what works (viz., success), but also the moral, or what is right (viz., justice) (Abernethy, 2020; Cascante, 2010; Cascante-Gómez, 2008; Dwertmann et al., 2016; Holvino & Kamp, 2009; Jayakumar et al., 2018; Jennings, 2020; Lang & Yandell, 2019; Luna De La Rosa & Jun, 2019; Nkomo et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2019; Roberson, 2014; Starck et al., 2021).⁴

And finally, implementation models at the time did not offer a comprehensive approach involving both institution-wide work and the moral imperative. Institution-focused models tended to emphasize the value of success (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2021; Hamlin, 2016; McNair & Veras, 2017; Milem et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2005). One justice-focused model reflected only on faculty experience rather than institution-wide impact (Haynes and Tuitt, 2020). One dual-focused model shifted the analysis level from the institution to the broader climate (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Four-Fold + MARED Tool

Considering the gap in implementation models, this first project built from two frameworks, the four-fold framework for institutional capacity for diversity (Smith, 2020) and the Model for Advancing Racial/Ethnic Diversity (MARED; Cascante-Gómez, 2008), to construct a two-part conceptual framework for evaluating the CEC initiative and resourcing ATS member schools. The four-fold framework emerges from higher education research, offering categories and metrics for success. The MARED framework adapts a management framework for use in theological education, offering categories for justice.

Through the study, I combined these frameworks into a conversation tool that helps schools analyze definitions of diversity and discern their next best steps. The tool functions as an integrated organizational improvement resource that supports schools to pursue not only inclusion but belonging and flourishing for all. It builds institutional capacity to engage in contextual, ongoing, measured progress in diversity and justice. Tools such as these are an important resource for theological schools aiming to meet accreditation standards and do their best work with and for diverse student populations.

Building from 40 years of historical, theoretical, and empirical research connected to diversity work on campuses across the United States, Smith (2020) developed a four-fold framework to define and measure diversity efforts at the institutional level (see Figure 1). The four categories of the framework include access/success, climate/intergroup relations, education/scholarship, and institutional viability/vitality. Smith observed and articulated metrics for each dimension of the framework (see Table 1), suggesting institutions utilize those metrics to practice ongoing measurement and iterative organizational learning and change.

Unfortunately, Smith's (2020) four-fold framework does not incorporate a moral value for diversity work.⁵ To help CEC schools reflect on justice, I added Cascante-Gómez's (2008) MARED. Building from the Multicultural Organizational Development model (MCOD; Jackson, 2014), used to promote multicultural change in higher education institutions, Cascante-Gómez (2008) created the MARED for theological schools (see Figure 2). MARED offers clear perspectives on justice through a developmental continuum. The continuum, particularly pertinent for PWTIs, moves from monocultural to multicultural (see Table 2). MARED can help theological schools articulate their perspectives on justice, identifying their location on the continuum and determining whether to move to a different location. The model includes goals and a Readiness Test adapted from MCOD (see Appendix A).

Smith's (2020) four-fold framework and Cascante-Gómez's (2008) MARED complement each other, forming a coherent, two-part conceptual framework for diversity work at ATS member schools. Smith's framework assesses success in diversity, providing institutional categories relevant for all institutions of higher education. Cascante-Gómez's model considers justice, detailing a developmental continuum of institutional perspectives on diversity. Essentially, Smith's framework focuses on the what and when of diversity work through its dimensions and metrics, while Cascante-Gómez's MARED suggests the why and how of diversity work through its continuum. The two-part framework can prompt ATS schools to consider the congruence of their work with their perspectives and the kind of work they might hope to pursue in the future.⁶

4. See also <https://www.decolonizedesign.com>, a global design consulting firm that created the Belonging, Dignity, and Justice (BDJ) framework.

5. Note that Smith aimed to incorporate into the framework a relationship between diversity and equity but that ultimately, on its own, Smith's (2020) framework does not structure categories or metrics for advancing equity.

6. The full Four-Fold + MARED tool is available in Appendix B and from the In Trust Center for Theological Education's podcast as part of "Episode 39: Starting the Diversity Discussion," (Hufman, 2023).

Figure 1:
Four-Fold Framework
(Smith, 2020)

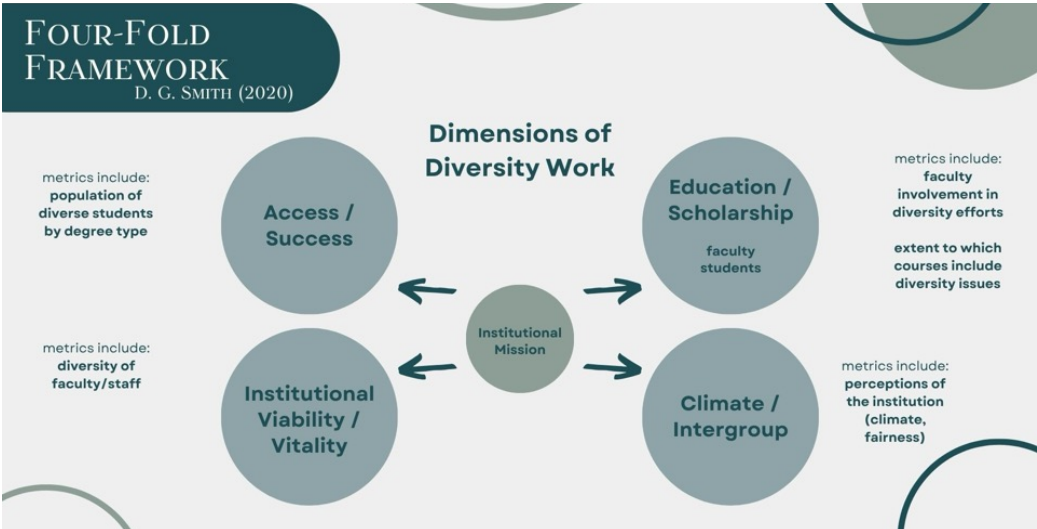


Table 1:
Four-Fold Framework
Dimensions and Metrics
(Smith, 2020)

Dimension	Metrics
Access/Success	population of diverse students by type of degree; success of diverse students (persistence, graduation, honors)
Climate/Intergroup Relations	perceptions of institution (climate, fairness); quality of experience (engagement on campus and/or satisfaction); type and quality of interactions among diverse groups
Education/Scholarship (Faculty)	faculty expertise on diversity-related matters; faculty involvement in diversity efforts; faculty research and publishing involving diversity
Education/Scholarship (Students)	availability of diversity-related courses and requirements; extent to which courses include diversity issues; student involvement in diversity-related courses; student research that engages the diverse society; quantity and substance of student learning about diversity; student final projects or dissertations related to diversity
Institutional Viability/Vitality	diversity of faculty/staff; board diversity and engagement; institutional history on diversity issues and incidents; institutional strategies and resources for diversity; centrality of diversity in institutional documents and processes; public constituency perceptions of institutional diversity, equity; framework and indicators for monitoring diversity

Figure 2:
Model for Advancing
Racial/Ethnic Diversity
(MARED) (Cascante-
Gómez, 2008)

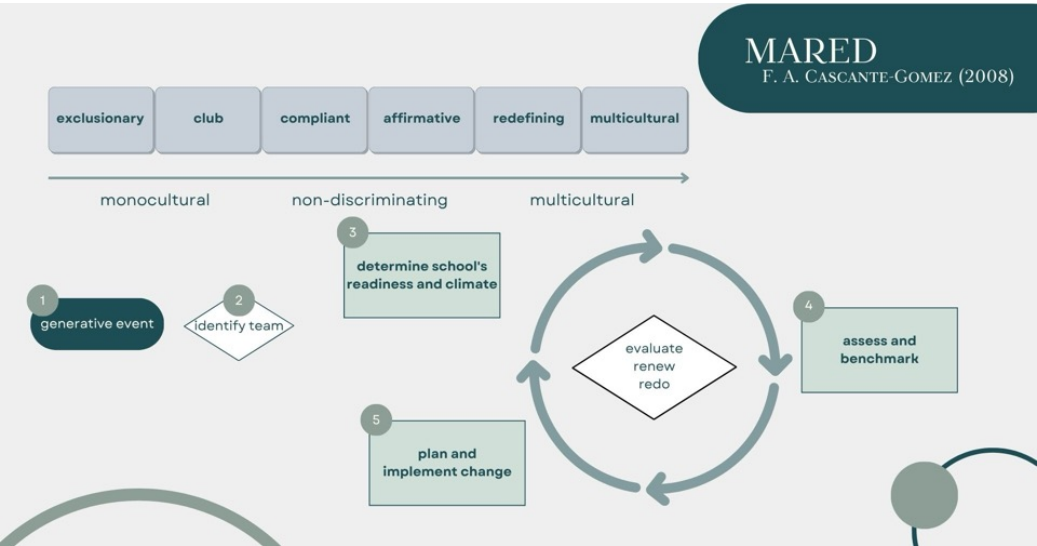


Table 2:
MARED Developmental
Categories and
Perspectives on Justice
(Cascante-Gómez, 2008)

Developmental Category	Perspective on Justice
Exclusionary	devoted to maintaining majority group dominance and hostile to concerns for social justice
Club	does not openly advocate supremacy of dominant group but implicitly maintains privileges of those who hold power
Compliant	responds to outside pressures regarding multicultural diversity but not fully convinced that social justice issues are of import for the institution or church at large
Affirming	explicitly aware of importance of social justice, grounded on sound theological and biblical principles and reflected in institutional policies and practices
Redefining	not fully content to be nonexclusive and nonoppressive, and works harder to learn from racial and ethnic diversity
Multicultural	embodies the ultimate vision of a multiracial/multiethnic theological institution, and moves beyond internal efforts to support social justice in larger society

Pedagogical Imagination

In 2025-2026, during the second Trump administration, I served as a Barbara Wheeler Fellow with Auburn Theological Seminary (NY). I wanted to continue exploring questions related to diversities in ATS member schools. At the time, I also was serving as Director of Education for Ministry Innovation at Acadia Divinity College (ADC) in Nova Scotia. In that role, I was the ADC Educationalist for a collaborative Pathways grant led by NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community (NAIITS) and called the Canadian Learning Community for Decolonization and Innovation in Theological Education (CLC). The partnership included senior leaders and educationalists from Tyndale Seminary (Toronto) and Ambrose Seminary (Calgary) as well.

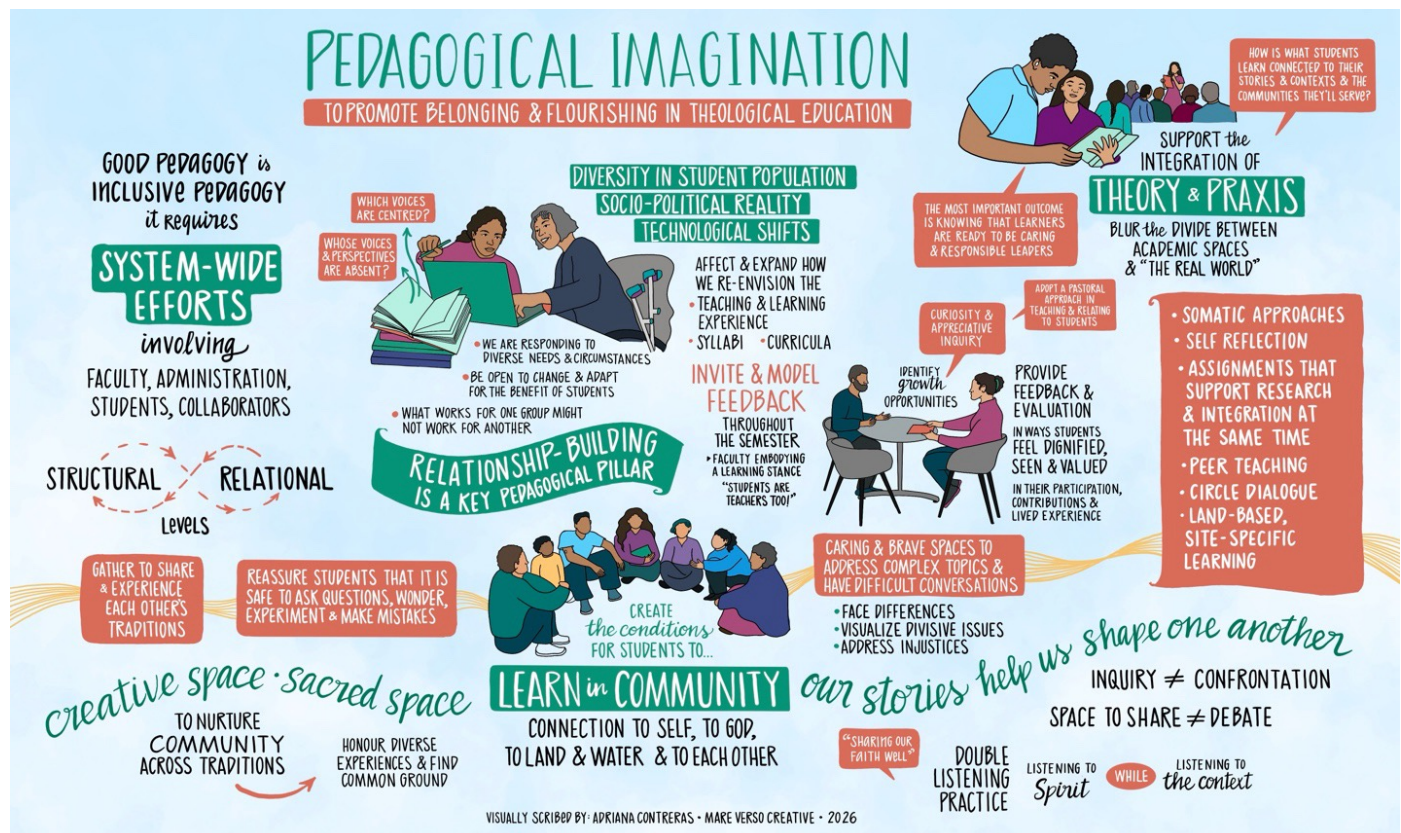
In consultation with Auburn, NAIITS, and ATS, I opted to construct a study focused on “pedagogical imagination”⁷ for serving diverse student populations well. I dove more deeply into Smith’s category of education/scholarship, and due to the current political climate, I opted this time not to distinguish between the categories of “success” and “justice.” I also intentionally chose to deemphasize contested words such as “decolonial” and “decolonize.”

I wanted to shape a brave space in which schools could have the conversations they wanted to have on the topic in this season. I wanted to learn more about efforts to shape pedagogical spaces that facilitate belonging and flourishing among all students.

I hoped a less formal methodology might illustrate how a research study can function as a community-of-practice exercise that sparks change in theological schools. I did not want to begin with frameworks or constructs that might constrain the study; instead, I wanted insights to surface organically. I also did not want to lean into grounded theory approaches. Ultimately, and with permission from the community (T. LeBlanc, personal communication, April 2026), I utilized the lens of Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI) to reflect on the data collected.

The project built from conversational methodologies that I first learned from my work with the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), a BIPOC-led theological leadership incubator based in Atlanta, GA. Later I learned more about such approaches from NAIITS, an Indigenous-

7. Inspired by Campbell-Reed (2021).



led theological school founded in Canada. These methodologies involve asset-based conversations that are embedded in community and anchored in story. They also may include straightforward questions that elicit open-ended insights (M. Hogeterp, personal communication, July 2025; M. LeBlanc and N. Forbes, personal communication, August 2025). They center the conversation circle, a facilitation method described by the Art of Hosting⁸ for diverse contexts and rooted in ancient wisdom that also undergirds Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry.⁹

I consulted with staff at Auburn, NAIITS, and ATS to develop a list of ATS schools that seemed to be exemplars in their efforts to serve diverse populations of students well. Of the 57 invited schools, 25 chose to participate. Unlike in my CEC research, this time I included schools from both the United States and Canada, with 15 U.S.-based and 10 Canada-based schools participating in the study. I again included representative schools from across the ATS ecclesial spectrum, though compared with current percentages across ATS schools, mainline schools were overrepresented. Of the 25, 15 (60%) were mainline Protestant, seven (28%) were evangelical Protestant, and three (12%) were Catholic.¹⁰

I offered two levels in the study. All schools participated in Level 1, which featured two, 90-minute Zoom call conversation circles between October and March with participants from multiple schools. I grouped schools by three to six schools per circle and by location, hosting three U.S. groups and two Canada groups. Participants from the same school engaged in the same circle when possible. A handful of participants engaged in more than one circle, if they could not join the same circle for the second-round call. For this first level, I invited graphic facilitator Adriana Contreras to help reflect on the data. She listened to recordings of all 10 calls in Level 1 and created four images, shared throughout this report and together on pages 42 and 43.

Five schools also participated in Level 2, which featured a single, 90-minute Zoom call conversation circle in either March or April for faculty members at individual institutions. Several of the schools invited additional faculty to participate in this deeper dive opportunity. A total of 62 individuals, including CAOs and other faculty, completed one or more parts of the study.

8. See more at <https://artofhosting.org>.

9. This study paralleled a similar effort implemented by the CLC that began in August 2025, which involved faculty conversation circles at CLC schools. I am grateful to NAIITS staff Nichole Forbes and Mike Hogeterp for inspiring this approach to the study.

10. ATS currently includes 32% mainline and 48% evangelical schools as well as 20% Roman Catholic/Orthodox."

“I would love to see us move beyond purely pedagogical language and talk about our work as truly formational.”

—U.S.A., ATS evangelical school

Parallel ATS Efforts

This pedagogical study complements ATS's own related work in the years since the Cultivating Educational Capacity initiative. In 2025-2026, ATS's Debbie H. C. Gin (Director of Research) led a team to develop the "ATS Survey of Deans: Adapting to Changing Student Demographics." The survey was a comprehensive exploration of the ways theological institutions are adapting to evolving student demographics across the four dimensions of Darryl G. Smith's four-fold framework (2020). The research was connected to the Pathways for Tomorrow coordination grant and conducted by research consultants from the Future of Faith.

Under the Smith dimension of education/scholarship, the survey asked at least three questions especially resonant with this study:

- Which of the following curricular or co-curricular strategies does your institution follow to address formation of students?¹¹
- Does your institution regularly assess whether faculty integrate the following practices in their teaching based on changing student demographics?¹²
- Are the following topics related to changing demographics, societal engagement, and cultural perspectives included in your institution's curriculum? (D. H. C. Gin, personal communications, 2025-2026)¹³

Approximately 100 deans from ATS schools completed the survey, with results forthcoming. The results will include insights disaggregated by some of the school-specific categories included in the survey (D. H. C. Gin, personal communications, 2025-2026). Some, but not all, of the participants in this study also completed the "ATS Survey of Deans." This study added a layer of qualitative insight to the survey results.

"We have tried to help students broaden what counts as sources of theology."

—Canada, ATS mainline school

Meanwhile, ATS's Frank Yamada (Executive Director) and Elsie Miranda (Director of Culture and Community Engagement) visited a regionally and denominationally diverse set of ATS schools from 2024-2026 for "appreciative diversity consultations." These consultations aimed to explore how each school lives into their missional identity as they attend to diversity. The visits gave schools an opportunity to "tell their story" and articulate impacts on their academic programs, spiritual communities, institutional morale, leadership, institutional resources, and overall educational context. The consultations highlighted strengths while offering affirmation for school accomplishments and support for what was yet to be realized.

11. Categories included spiritual practices and formation that reflect diverse traditions; curriculum and academic resources connected to diverse contexts; field education and internships with multicultural, multilingual, or underserved communities; and training in cultural competency and social justice as preparation for ministry or counseling licensure.

12. Categories included experiential strategies, application of education to lived experience, attention to spiritual formation, attention to vocational discernment, integration of ethical reflection and emotional intelligence, and embodied or creative learning practices.

13. Categories included race, ethnicity, and racial justice; gender and gender equality; socioeconomic inequality and class diversity; interfaith dialogue and religious diversity; global and cross-cultural perspectives; diverse sexual and gender identities; disability inclusion; immigrant experiences; and intersectionality.

At the conclusion of the consultations, ATS planned to share broad strokes of what they had learned with ATS member schools to amplify institutional ethos and capacity regarding diversity. A synthesis report is forthcoming. Some of ATS's initial observations about schools that are on the cutting edge with their diversities work include:

- They presume diversity is a theological commitment grounded in scripture, and they operate with a posture of intellectual humility and Christian hospitality.
- They are responsive to the particularities of diversity in their context.
- They have executive leaders who champion diversity, which affects hiring practices and support for faculty and staff.
- Some are engaged in helping respond to the traumas that diverse student populations and individuals have long embodied.
- Their faculty have a sense of pedagogical accompaniment, attending to the humans in front of them and their spiritual and pastoral formation.
- They abide in a culture of evaluation and continuous improvement.

This study extends this appreciative practice across more schools and examines related pedagogical insights in greater depth. For schools eager to take next steps in defining and embodying diversity on their campuses, leaders and faculty now have the resources of the Four-Fold + MARED tool, the "ATS Survey of Deans," the ATS "appreciative diversity consultations," and specific pedagogical ideas emerging from this study.

An Interlude on Love

I began this report with a reflection on *hesed*, God's steadfast love, as a model for our educational and pastoral efforts. I mentioned frameworks to help us conceive practical approaches to *hesed* in our work. At Auburn Theological Seminary, the core mission is to "lead with love." Over the course of this study, I wondered how *hesed* and *perichoresis*, God's Trinitarian love dance, can guide our pedagogy with all our diverse students. What practical frameworks might we create to help us?

The closest resources I've found in this vein focus on Indigenous talking circles as pedagogical practices for decolonizing education. These circles can take the distinct asset-based approach exemplified by Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI). They can take a constructive critical approach, emphasizing mutual learning through situated relatedness, or situating selves in context to others; respectful listening posture and/or a reflective witnessing approach, or reconsidering one's own perspectives in view of the experiences and perspectives of others (Barkaskas and Gladwin, 2021). Most essentially, they seem to embody the sort of relationality and potential for "societal re-creation" that *perichoresis* can inspire. For example, in African contexts:

Scholarly reflections on the implications of interdependence at the divine level have contributed to the call for leadership cultures that embody Trinitarian mutuality and proximity as opposed to top-down power, bolstering traditional African communal decision-making systems such as Ghana's Asafo councils or Nigeria's Igbo consensus-based leadership. ... In [Jean-Marc] Ela's vision, perichoresis is not just spiritual communion but requires material solidarity whereby structures must be transfigured to denote the divine life of love, justice, and interdependence. ... [Jonathan] Edwards's insistence on diffusive divine love summons communities to embody radical relationality, especially in terms of ethnic and religious reconciliation. (Twumasi-Ankrah & Boaheng, 2025)

If pedagogy can be perichoretic, what would it look like? Alongside the circle method, what other insights or practices could guide our efforts? We could explore the possibility of a "pedagogy of friendship" in the classroom, asking students to empathize with, or even befriend, external sources and each other even as they disagree (Burt, 2021). We might want to reimagine how we invite students to relate with all of creation, including land,

water, and other creatures (Medley, 2025). We would reenvision the instructor-student relationship to ensure a spaciousness of welcome, knowledge, and practice in classrooms that served students of diverse identities preparing to minister in diverse contexts (Porter, 2025; Porter, in press).

These are some of the wonderings that shaped this study, and they remain lines of possible future inquiry. In addition to the conversation circle, the other primary muse I chose for this project was Eileen Campbell-Reed's *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life* (2021), a collection of vignettes and practical suggestions for cultivating the sensibilities students need to serve in ministry. What would it look like, I asked participants, to compile a similar book on "pedagogical imagination"?¹⁴ What are the best stories and examples they might share from their own pedagogical practice for creating curricula and classrooms where all students belong and flourish?

In conversation with Auburn and NAIITS, I opted not to create a research question more specific than this general, asset-based curiosity around pedagogies with diverse populations of students. I focused on inviting faculty to share stories and/or insights. In keeping with the methodology of the conversation circle, I did not choose a conceptual framework prior to the Zoom calls, nor did I analyze data through an inductive grounded theory method; instead, I utilized Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry to synthesize highlights that emerged. One significant insight stands out: Schools are concerned not simply with disciplinary content, but with student formation. Perhaps we could say they are concerned with formation into *hesed*, or *perichoresis*.

How can *hesed* and *perichoresis*, God's Trinitarian love dance, guide our pedagogy with all our diverse students? What practical frameworks might we create to help us?

14. I did not invite participants to reflect on *Teaching Christian Imagination* (Smith and Felch, 2016). This book is a rich resource that inspires the teaching imagination through three metaphors rooted in the Christian story: journeys and pilgrimages, gardens and wilderness, and buildings and walls.

Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry

After I completed the 15 Zoom calls that comprise this study, I sought out mentor and friend Terry LeBlanc, founding Chair of the Board and Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community. I needed a way to share faithfully the stories and insights entrusted to me. I asked his permission to utilize the Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI) process as a frame for doing so, and I began by asking what makes IAI different from basic Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Both include a four-phase, “4-D” process of Discovery, Dreaming, Design, and Delivery. Because Terry (or Uncle Terry, as we members of the NAIITS community respectfully address him) prefers to practice the oral tradition for learning and teaching, he has not yet published his full thoughts on this question. I share a condensed version of them here with his blessing.

Terry was exposed to Appreciative Inquiry through the Case Western Reserve University’s Global Excellence in Management program. For that program, he engaged in a three-week intensive in Atlanta and Birmingham regarding the work of the founders of AI, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. He then completed a one-year practicum in 1991-1992.

Over time, as Terry began to utilize the AI approach in his work, he noticed that participants often found it easy to engage in the first two steps in the process, Discovery and Dreaming, but not the final two. Participants could distill asset-based themes for their work (Discovery) and begin to sketch a related vision (Dreaming). However, most struggled to move into the Design step, and even fewer could take a programmatic approach to Delivery rooted in ongoing iterative practice. In fact, many distilled the asset-based approach to a strengths-based method not unlike the beginning of the SWOT process. And then they defaulted to a deficit-based approach, emphasizing weaknesses and threats, going forward. Uncle Terry wondered what modifications to the AI process could make it more effective. Terry identified at least three key modifications that he, and later his son, Matt LeBlanc, have added to the AI process over time, informed by their deep wells of Indigenous heritage:

- IAI is rooted in narrative. It does not involve looking for “shopping lists” of strengths but instead emphasizes sharing stories, which makes it less likely that participants will disrespect each other’s insights. In the Discovery phase, IAI participants tell stories toward the same prompt, focused on a particular idea or activity, and identify common factors (themes) across those stories. Telling stories to the same prompt lends validity to the themes that emerge. Participants organize the common factors into a “positive core” out of which a vision statement is crafted.
- IAI participants utilize these vision statements to begin to operationalize next steps. In the Design phase, they do not convert a vision statement into a mission statement but rather use the key elements of that vision (often portrayed pictorially in the prior Dreaming phase) to plan out what their work could now look like. Participants reflect on how they have done related work previously and how they might do it now, with an asset-based lens remaining as the means of focus.
- For the Design and Delivery phases, IAI participants use a matrix (chart) system to conceive of concrete ways to operationalize the vision. Participants can chart the common factors from their vision on the X axis alongside areas of inquiry on the Y axis (like Smith’s dimensions, or individual elements of those dimensions, or pieces of a graduate course or extracurricular event, etc.). The matrix allows participants to identify required people, other resources, or actions to take next steps without focusing on problems or risking stalling overall. It identifies the who, what, when, and where details that groups need to implement the vision and move forward (T. LeBlanc, personal communications, April and May 2026).

In what follows, I share insights from the Zoom calls in conjunction with these categories.

Discovery

In a traditional IAI process, a facilitator invites a community to divide into small storytelling groups focused on a particular prompt. Each member of each group shares a three- to five-minute story in the presence of at least one listener (who also functions as a timekeeper) and one recorder. At the conclusion of the story, the listener and recorder reflect back to the storyteller key insights they heard, inviting confirmation or clarification. The recorder notes at least three key themes (in a word or short phrase) on large-sized index cards as the core insights from that story. After everyone in the small group has taken turns as storyteller, listener, and recorder, the facilitator invites all groups to share their index cards with the room. The full group then begins to organize those cards into key themes and build a vision statement that highlights core values across all stories. The facilitator supports participants to focus on asset-based, positive highlights rather than negative experiences or frustrations.

In this study, I did not use this particular storytelling process, but I did solicit asset-based stories and open-ended insights. After inviting introductions that allowed groups to connect and begin to build trust, the core questions I asked in Level 1 included:

- What diverse populations of students does your school serve?
- Tell a story illustrating one practice you or your school utilizes to shape pedagogical spaces of belonging or flourishing among all students.
- One inspiration for this study is Eileen Campbell-Reed's *Pastoral Imagination* (2021), which comprises 50 vignettes about practices that best embody the work of being a pastor. If there were a similar book on pedagogical imagination, including vignettes about practices that best embody the work of being a theological educator, what is one practice that you would include? Think especially about practices that facilitate pedagogical spaces of belonging or flourishing among all students.
- How would you describe the thrust of the work at your school to shape pedagogical spaces for all: Does it emphasize structural concerns more or relational concerns more? Or does it emphasize both somewhat equally? How?
- [For Canada-based groups]: Has your institution responded intentionally to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (especially #59 and #60) as it shapes pedagogical spaces? If so, how?
- What are two or three resources that your school needs right now to do this work well? Would you find it valuable to continue meeting in groups like these to have similar Zoom conversations, outside of this study? Why or why not?

For the Level 2 conversations with individual faculties, I added a core question that elicited more specific asset-based insights on intercultural and/or decolonial pedagogical efforts:

- In *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (2021), Christine J. Hong reflects on possible pedagogical goals for the future of theological education. To what extent (or not) do any of these goals reflect your school's pedagogical aims with diverse student populations? Possible goals include intercultural intelligence, transformation (of structures, etc. for justice), and navigation of conflict. And do other goals come to mind?

I also chose to share categories for pedagogical work that could help faculty articulate their stories. During each circle in Level 1, I invited faculty to think about their content, teaching foundations / perspectives, epistemology, teaching purpose / goals, instructors, learners, instructor-learner relationships, power, classroom environment, values, methods, assessment / evaluation, and adjustment (Gin, 2012; Hong, 2021; Itwaru, 2024; Nelson Laird, 2010). In some conversations, we also engaged with the “gogies” spectrum (Porter, 2024b). For Canada-based schools, I invited conversation on pedagogical responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action regarding the destructive legacy of the residential schools. In Level

2, I also referenced Bloom's Taxonomy and the Medicine Wheel (Porter, 2024a).

What follows are highlights from the stories and insights that emerged. I begin with an overview of the types of student diversities represented among the participating schools. Then, following the IAI process, I organize stories into what emerged as five key categories: relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies; contextual and justice-oriented pedagogies; flexible, student-centered, and reflective learning design; trauma-informed pedagogies; and structural supports for learning. After these summaries, I feature pedagogical sparks from five participating schools, to add texture and serve as fodder for creative imagination. Finally, as in IAI, I suggest vision statements that identify core values across stories, offering one statement for schools in Canada and one for schools in the United States.

In my work to summarize stories, identify key categories, and suggest core values for vision statements, I leveraged support from Otter.ai, ChatGPT, and Google Gemini. Participants were aware that I might utilize generative AI resources to analyze data, and I closely edited all content to confirm the results I share here. I also utilized versions of each of these applications that protect the confidentiality of participants and these insights, versions that do not use participant details to improve their AI models.



Has your institution
responded intentionally
to the Truth and
Reconciliation
Commission's Calls
to Action as it shapes
pedagogical spaces?

Student Diversities

Among schools in Canada and the United States, faculty identified several dimensions of diversity represented in their student populations. Unlike in my Cultivating Educational Capacity study, which focused on racial and ethnic diversities, schools here reflected on multiple forms of diversity: cultural, ethnic, and racial; geographic and locational; ecclesial and religious; and many other categories, such as disability, neurodiversity, gender, gender identity, and sexuality.

Schools in Canada

Across the 10 schools in Canada in their two Zoom groups, faculty identified ethnically diverse student bodies that often reflected the regions where the schools are located. Student populations included Indigenous, European, Latin American, Asian, West African, Egyptian, and Syrian lineages as well as immigrant and recent-immigrant communities. Students hailed from multiple provinces and international contexts, including the United States, South America, Korea and other Asian countries, and African countries. Their contexts included urban, rural, and small-town locations.

These schools welcomed students from across Christian ecclesial traditions, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Non-denominational traditions. Some served students from other religious traditions as well, including Unitarian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist, or with interfaith interests. These 10 Canada-based schools also reported navigating several other types of diversities in their student populations, including linguistic, socioeconomic, neurodiversity and physical disability, gender, gender identity / sexuality, age and life-stage, educational background, and academic / vocational goals.

Schools in the United States

Across the 15 schools in the United States in their three Zoom groups, faculty described student populations that included African American / Black students, Asian and Asian American students, Hispanic / Latiné students, mixed-race students, other racialized communities, and white students. Some schools highlighted distinctive diaspora and immigrant populations as well as international students. Some also referenced students shaped by migration, displacement, or transnational church contexts. U.S.-based schools reflected on at least two cultural or racial categories that Canada-based schools did not: Black-majority seminaries and oral-preference learners in global contexts. Like the schools in Canada,

the schools in the United States described students from urban, suburban, and rural locations. U.S.-based institutions served learners distributed across many states and countries through online programs. One institution described a global constituency across dozens of countries and all seven continents.

As did the Canada-based schools, these schools reflected broad ecclesial diversity across Christian traditions, including Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Non-denominational traditions. Some faculty described wide theological diversity within institutions, ranging from progressive to conservative perspectives. Also like some schools in Canada, some schools in the United States highlighted significant religious diversity, including students connected with Unitarianism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jain traditions, and students identifying as religiously unaffiliated or “spiritual but not religious.”

Like the Canada-based schools, these institutions in the United States reported a wide range of additional diversities such as linguistic, socioeconomic, neurodiversity and physical disability, gender, gender identity / sexuality,

“Putting something on a reading list is not the full extent of what it means to do the work that the TRC is asking of institutions, particularly those like ours who have our roots in the traditions responsible for founding the residential schools.”

—Canada, ATS evangelical school

age and life-stage, educational background, and vocational goals.

Pedagogical Practices

All participating schools shared stories illustrating how they cultivate pedagogical spaces of belonging and flourishing for all students. I summarize key practices in five categories: relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies; contextual and justice-oriented pedagogies; flexible, student-centered, and reflective learning design; trauma-informed pedagogies; and structural supports for learning. These categories helpfully organize insights across both groups of schools, Canada-based and U.S.-based.

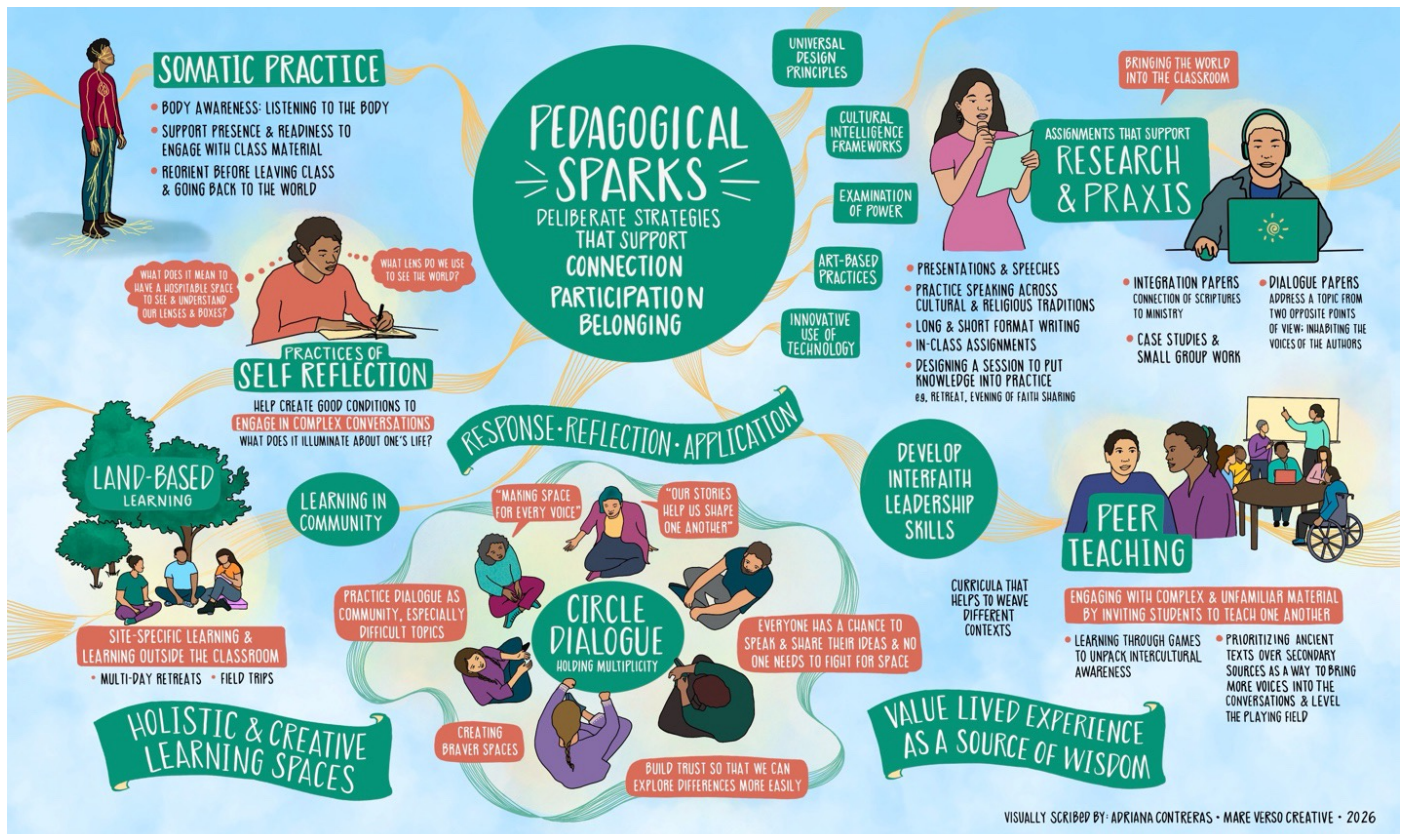
Schools in Canada

Relational and Belonging-Oriented Pedagogies

In working with diverse populations of students, Canada-based schools emphasized pedagogies rooted

“I’m trying to democratize the experience in the classroom in ways that resonate with what they will need to do as pastors and leaders. They need to rethink their presumptions of power and embody shared power instead.”

—U.S.A., ATS mainline school



in relationship, trust, and belonging, whether engaging in person or online. Faculty cultivated classrooms designed for mutual learning, arranging discussions in circles to reinforce collective wisdom, non-hierarchical participation, and shared responsibility for learning. Instructors used appreciative inquiry approaches that began with students' strengths, experiences, and prior knowledge. Some Catholic institutions utilized synodal sessions as practices of deep listening and communal discernment for pastoral formation. One school emphasized "double listening," inviting students to attend both to the Spirit and to the lived realities of the communities they served.

Community-building practices extended beyond formal instruction into practices of hospitality and shared spiritual life. Faculty intentionally created welcoming classroom environments by serving cookies or fostering informal conversation spaces that reduced anxiety and strengthened trust. They used informal check-ins to gauge students' sense of belonging, confidence, and readiness for ministry. Further, schools cultivated belonging through chapel services and student-led spiritual gatherings representing diverse cultural and religious traditions. These gatherings functioned not only as worship experiences but also as pedagogical spaces for intercultural and interfaith encounter, helping students learn from one another's traditions while developing deeper capacities for empathy, mutual understanding, and community leadership.

Contextual and Justice-Oriented Pedagogies

Schools in Canada emphasized contextual theological learning, intercultural engagement, and reconciliation shaped by relationships with Indigenous communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Faculty revised curricula, developed institutional initiatives, and sustained long-term engagement with Indigenous communities as part of broader efforts to reshape theological education. One institution embedded Indigenous-settler relations as a cross-curricular theme across programs. Others incorporated Indigenous knowledge keepers into oral examinations, bringing Indigenous ways of knowing directly into evaluative structures. Instructors included land-based pedagogies to connect theological learning to places, communities, and histories rather than treating theology as an abstract classroom exercise.

Faculty at these schools also emphasized contextual and justice-oriented pedagogies through intercultural case studies, interfaith leadership courses, and assignments that invited students to engage multiple perspectives

with empathy and care. They encouraged students to interrogate their own biases and interpretive frameworks, using metaphors such as "lenses" and "boxes," while preparing them for ministry within intercultural and pluralistic contexts. One instructor assigned dialogue papers that asked students to write in the voices of "polar opposite" authors to cultivate empathetic listening and multi-perspectival thinking.

Flexible, Student-Centered, and Reflective Learning Design

Canada-based schools employed flexible and adaptive forms of teaching and assessment that recognized diverse cultural backgrounds, emotional realities, learning styles, and ways of demonstrating knowledge. Faculty emphasized intrinsic motivation and personal formation. Rather than assigning long research papers, faculty designed shorter, integrative assignments and feedback exercises that promoted engagement, enabled quick feedback cycles, and helped students connect learning across contexts and courses. They also assigned speeches and presentations as major forms of assessment, expanding beyond essay-based work to include oral and rhetorical forms of learning. Faculty encouraged student-led discussions and incorporated multiple modes of participation, including presentations, creative projects, and small-group work, to honor different cultural backgrounds and learning preferences. Some instructors also invited students into shared ownership of the learning process. They asked students what they hoped to learn and how they wished to demonstrate their learning, allowing students to help shape activities and assessments. Practices such as brief critical reflection sheets for the end of each class session further emphasized learning as an ongoing process of self-awareness, emotional processing, and integration rather than solely the production of academic outputs.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogies

Faculty intentionally cultivated "brave spaces" where students could engage difficult conversations about colonization, power, and trauma honestly while maintaining mutual respect and accountability. Instructors guided students through emotionally charged material with attentiveness to trauma and respectful engagement. Some faculty incorporated somatic exercises that helped students remain grounded and regulate stress when discussing painful material. Faculty also developed protocols for responding to emotionally intense classroom moments or student crises, treating responsiveness and care as integral parts of pedagogical practice rather than interruptions to learning.

Structural Supports for Learning

Faculty at Canada-based schools also highlighted structural supports for learning that affect accessibility and flourishing, reflecting on physical spaces as well as elements of curriculum, policies, and pedagogical design. Schools invested in accessible learning environments and adapted courses and assessments for neurodivergent and diverse learners. Faculty framed technology less as a neutral tool and more as part of a broader institutional responsibility to create equitable and responsive learning environments for diverse students. Some institutions explored the implications of artificial intelligence for theological education and assessment.

Schools in the United States

Relational and Belonging-Oriented Pedagogies

In working with diverse populations of students, schools in the United States also emphasized relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies. Faculty adapted expectations, readings, and assessments to reflect student experiences, cultures, and learning needs. At least one faculty person accepted slower or less measurable results in exchange for deeper trust, safety, and belonging. Instructors used cohort groups and study groups to build relationships and deepen understanding. Many instructors replaced lecture-heavy formats with seminars or discussion circles in which students drove much of the conversation, particularly in ethnically and denominationally diverse classrooms. “Global Conversations” and other listening-focused courses invited students to hear and share stories from diverse communities and then present their learning back to the class. Some faculty designed group projects that intentionally combined students across cultures and backgrounds to emphasize intercultural dynamics as part of the learning.

Beyond regular classroom instruction, faculty developed additional relational practices. One institution emphasized mentored learning as a primary mode of formation rather than an added layer of advising, using multi-mentor teams of faculty and practitioners to guide students within their own ministry contexts, provide “guard rails,” and support long-term reflection on difficult experiences. Faculty provided high-touch relational support for marginalized and international students through mentoring, regular check-ins, and personalized care. Schools offered Zoom-based community activities to support geographically dispersed students, including open Zoom rooms before and after class, travel-supported homecoming or graduation

gatherings, and informal online events such as “Got Talent” nights. Communal rituals, including worship and fasting practices, also functioned as pedagogical spaces that shaped identity, encouraged reflection, and strengthened communal learning. In some schools, faculty incorporated inclusive worship and multilingual practices to foster belonging across cultural and linguistic differences.

Contextual and Justice-Oriented Pedagogies

Unlike schools in Canada, schools in the United States did not have the imperatives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to guide justice-focused insights and efforts. Nonetheless, as faculty contextualized curriculum and assignments to students’ cultural locations and ministry settings, they often did so with a justice-oriented lens. In courses on race, power, and identity, instructors collaborated with students to build shared glossaries, language covenants, and conversation practices that addressed the histories and implications of racial and ethnic terminology while encouraging accountability without punitive shame. Other faculty used restorative justice circles to redistribute power, democratize classroom dynamics, and address harm or tension collectively. Some schools incorporated civil rights pilgrimages through places such as Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, bringing faculty and students together for immersive learning experiences that were later integrated into curriculum design through structured faculty retreats. Other schools had designed prison education programs that offered degree programs inside state prisons. Long-term cohort models (e.g., D.Min. cohorts) fostered sustained cross-cultural engagement that sometimes led to significant shifts in perspective on difficult topics. Some institutions aimed to embed responsive and justice-oriented pedagogies within institutional culture, relying not on single faculty for such approaches but instead developing the full faculty for such efforts via resources on bias, trauma, self-reflection, and intercultural conflict facilitation.

Flexible, Student-Centered, and Reflective Learning Design

Faculty in U.S.-based schools also adapted classroom learning and assessment through flexible, student-centered, and reflective practices that invited deeper engagement with texts, contexts, and communities. Some faculty used play-focused pedagogies to create “conditions for meaningful encounters” with texts in language courses. One instructor incorporated ritual-based learning to foster student belonging and help

students internalize readings by asking them to design related rituals. Another instructor used material culture and site-visit pedagogy to help students encounter the Bible through artifacts, museum visits, and other media that engaged learners who did not connect with text-only approaches. One class used podcast-based formats to invite shared theological reflection through collaborative productions focused on relevant novels. Faculty assigned arts-based projects, including visual theology, poetry, film analysis, and other artistic options to welcome diverse engagement and resist AI-generated responses. Ongoing storytelling and reflective writing encouraged students to name their identities and interdependence with others. Pastoral formation courses featured self-reflective portfolios. Some instructors negotiated syllabi with students, allowing them to shape expectations, focus areas, and assignments in ways that built ownership and shared responsibility. Some schools reduced or eliminated conventional “elite” grading distinctions to shift attention from performance and competition toward learning and creativity. Others adopted competency-based theological education (CBTE) models that organized programs around contextual, demonstrated competencies instead of seat time.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogies

In courses when “identity and theology collide,” instructors guided students through processes for addressing experiences of trauma, deconstruction, and conflict within the classroom itself. They taught students how to navigate vulnerability, harm, and disagreement in community while

creating spaces for restorative dialogue and reflection. Faculty normalized care within the learning process through structured check-in practices that invited students to share how they were doing, how they were “holding others,” and what practices of care they carried from their families or ancestors. Faculty also engaged one-on-one with students who reacted defensively, experienced distress, or struggled with course material, treating those conversations not as “extra” labor but as integral to pedagogy.

Structural Supports for Learning

Like schools in Canada, schools in the United States strengthened structural supports for diverse student populations in multiple ways. Some developed disability-inclusive classrooms that normalized different bodies, minds, and learning needs. Many instructors adapted teaching for diverse students by attending to language barriers, communal cultural patterns, and varied educational backgrounds. Faculty also explored generative artificial intelligence as a tool for accessibility and support for differently prepared students. They approached AI as a tool rather than a threat, designing assignments that required contextualization, personal reflection, and creativity that artificial intelligence could not easily replicate. They adopted nuanced approaches to plagiarism detection to avoid disproportionately penalizing students from non-dominant cultures. Instructors also experimented transparently with artificial intelligence in assessment design and feedback, receiving positive responses from students when the feedback was thoughtful.

Faculty normalized care within the learning process through structured check-in practices that invited students to share how they were doing, how they were “holding others,” and what practices of care they carried from their families or ancestors.

School Vignettes

To add texture to these story insights, I offer five brief vignettes from the participating schools from Level 2 of the study. Two schools in Canada, one evangelical and one mainline, as well as three schools in the United States, two evangelical and one mainline, participated in a deeper dive conversation. These conversations often included additional members of faculty who had not participated in the initial Level 1 conversations. Pedagogical sparks include classroom-level and program-level insights for in-person and online settings.



KNOX COLLEGE

Knox College

Toronto (Canada, ATS mainline school)

Located in the hyper-diverse context of Toronto and embedded within the University of Toronto and the Toronto School of Theology, Knox College works at the intersection of traditional theological education, professional psychotherapy training, and multi-faith formation. Students at Knox vary by ethnicity and language, Indigenous-settler histories, immigration histories, and cultural patterns such as collectivist / individualist orientations. Students also vary by faith position (Christian, multi-faith, and “spiritual but not religious”), denomination (from Pentecostal to liberal Protestant and beyond), and prior exposure to the Bible and theology. Faculty emphasize that diversity is not an abstract concept but very present in every classroom.

In his biblical studies courses, Associate Professor of Old Testament / Hebrew Scriptures Brian Irwin utilizes an online “yeshiva” pedagogical model. He pairs students in Zoom rooms to wrestle inductively with texts across genres before plenary synthesis. His approach helps cohorts with widely different theological backgrounds co-construct meaning, making interpretive diversity itself a core learning resource.

Knox offers a Master of Psychospiritual Studies (MPS), preparing many students for registered psychotherapy in multifaith, often secular contexts. The program combines a required Interfaith Leadership in a Multifaith Context course with practica in community settings within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Faculty document student formation through weekly reflection journals, case conferences, and midterm / final self-evaluations in which students articulate their learning and growth regarding cultural, religious, and worldview diversity. Knox faculty are wondering how this kind of structured, self-reflective formation can inform the MDiv and MTS programs as well, so ministry students benefit from similarly intentional attention to the dynamics of identity, power, and related practice. Academic Dean and Professor of Hebrew Bible Christine Mitchell observed, “We should be learning from our MPS program regarding the kind of careful self-formation that can happen for students from diverse backgrounds preparing to serve in a diverse world. It could enhance our efforts on that same aspect of formation in our traditional theological programs as well.” They already have taken steps in this direction by recommending the Interfaith Leadership course as an optional course for all MDiv students.



Wycliffe College

Toronto (Canada, ATS evangelical school)

Wycliffe College is an Anglican seminary embedded within the University of Toronto and Toronto School of Theology in the richly diverse city of Toronto. Its student body reflects significant denominational diversity (with Anglicans now comprising less than a quarter of the population) alongside cultural, ethnic, and international diversity, including diasporic communities and recent arrivals from East and Southeast Asia. Many students take classes part-time, commute, or participate through hybrid (dual delivery) formats. Amidst these diversities, Wycliffe resists overly prescriptive or technique-driven pedagogies. Instead, the College foregrounds attentiveness to students as persons and fosters dialogical spaces where cultural, theological, and experiential differences become resources for shared formation.

Faculty at Wycliffe emphasize mutual learning grounded in trust. They intentionally connect with students through relational engagement, prayer, and one-on-one interaction, particularly in hybrid environments where relationships are harder to establish. Practices such as early-term individual meetings or ongoing advisory conversations are not merely support structures but core pedagogical strategies that enable intellectual and spiritual risk-taking across differences.

Wycliffe has integrated intercultural engagement as both curriculum and lived classroom reality. Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic Theology Justin Stratis noted, “We had a class called Intercultural Leadership, and our new professor suggested we change the title to Intercultural Engagement to encourage our students not to enter into diverse contexts with a leadership mentality but rather a posture of mutual engagement and learning.” Alongside such required courses, the College embeds diversity experientially through discussion-driven learning that draws directly on students’ ministry contexts. Classroom conversations often engage complex realities such as cross-cultural leadership within diasporic congregations (e.g., Korean pastors of primarily Vietnamese congregations).



BSK Theological Seminary

Kentucky (U.S.A., ATS evangelical school)

BSK Theological Seminary (BSK) was a predominantly white seminary until the late 2010s, when the HBCU Simmons College proposed a partnership that serves a significant number of Black students in Louisville, Kentucky. An additional partnership with the National Baptist Convention of America followed. As of 2025-2026, the school serves 60-65% African American and 30% white students as well as 5% Asian American and/or international students. Faculty anticipate expanding relationships with Indigenous and global communities as well. Now a fully online seminary, students come from multiple denominational backgrounds (Baptist, Pentecostal, progressive, and deconstructing traditions), and an increasing number are rural, underserved, and/or multi-vocational students.

BSK embeds trauma-informed pedagogy through faculty development (e.g., grants focused on teaching through trauma) and classroom practice.

Faculty cultivate “safe enough” spaces in which students process their lived experiences. Practices include dialogical learning, flexible boundaries around the content for learning, attention to emotional responses, and assignments that foster self-reflection and identity formation. Through these practices, faculty aim to support the formation of students navigating marginalization or theological deconstruction.

BSK is experimenting with expansive ways of being and knowing that move beyond Western, purely cognitive frameworks. Faculty draw on Black, womanist, intercultural, agrarian, ecological, and ecowomanist theologies that resonate with diverse learners, emphasizing relationships among self, God, others, and creation. Emerging interests in concepts such as “vegetal life,” which explores non-brain-based forms of intelligence and the relational, responsive capacities of plant life, prompt faculty to rethink knowledge as embodied, ecological, and interconnected. These interests expand epistemological humility and encourage attentiveness to diverse cultural and ecological wisdoms. CAO and Professor of Theology Mark Medley observed, “Aspects of life that we don’t often notice, like the relationships of plants with each other and the broader world, can help us radically rethink how we live in relationship and how we approach epistemology and pedagogy more inclusively.”



Central Seminary

Kansas (U.S.A., ATS mainline school)

Central Seminary is a historically Midwestern school now operating seven total in-person sites to accommodate international students as well. It serves students from the U.S. alongside students from African countries and a significant portion of students from South Korea and Myanmar (including Chin, Kachin, and other ethnic groups). Students embody a multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities, languages, ages, theological commitments, and ministry contexts.

At Central, diversity undergirds the curriculum and infrastructure. Faculty redesign syllabi so that global Christian history and non-Western theologians are part of the core curricula rather than “add-on” embellishments. The library expanded Korean holdings and aims to acquire emerging Chin and Kachin scholarship, signaling that students’ own languages and knowledge traditions hold significant academic value. The seminary has shifted from course-level mastery to program-wide developmental learning, emphasizing phases of introduction, development, and later demonstration of competencies across courses to create space for transformation to unfold over time.

While not a fully online school, online delivery has prompted distinctive pedagogical practices at Central. Faculty often record and caption sessions yet deliberately suspend recording for highly vulnerable conversations (e.g., racism in chaplaincy). They scaffold language and processing needs through pre-posted discussion prompts, options to participate via written or multimodal responses, and delayed written responses after class interaction. The seminary uses technology creatively and critically, experimenting with Zoom-based translation (BoostLingo), students’ own phone-based translation, and WhatsApp for cross-continental communication, alongside explicit attention to the colonial biases of artificial intelligence tools.

Online students participate in field-based “Micah 6:8” projects that exemplify how to embody belonging and justice in diverse contexts. Students invest 20–25 hours in concrete work of “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly” in their own locations and present their learnings to their class. One Burmese student living in the U.S., for example, negotiated fair treatment and basic dignities (breaks, hot water for tea, benefits) for immigrant coworkers in a meatpacking plant where he worked.



Kairos University

South Dakota / international (U.S.A., ATS evangelical school)

Located in South Dakota, Kairos University is an evangelical seminary that serves students from 60 countries and 70 denominations. Rather than starting with institutional structures and asking how to “include” diverse learners, Kairos inverts the usual logic of North American theological education: the student’s local ministry context becomes the primary locus of learning, and Kairos reconfigures itself around that context. Belonging and flourishing at Kairos are less about fitting students into a predetermined mold and more about building the “mold” around students, their communities, and their callings.

Kairos is a fully online seminary that utilizes the model of competency based theological education (CBTE), which the institution frames as a means rather than an end. Anchored in four core values – affordable, accessible, relevant, and faithful – Kairos redesigns curriculum, assessment, and faculty roles to support individualized journeys of discipleship. Emphasizing “content, character, and craft” as integrated forms of knowledge, the seminary privileges demonstrated proficiency over seat time, written outputs, or standardized curricula. Every student works with a team of three mentors (faculty, vocational, and personal mentors), shifting faculty from “dispensers of knowledge” to facilitators and companions.

Kairos is building a blended BA/MA for oral and oral-preference learners, leveraging CBTE and AI to recognize full academic proficiency beyond print-based literacy norms. Global learners who cannot read or write are effectively excluded from accredited degrees, Kairos faculty observe, even when they are experienced pastors or ministry leaders. Kairos names this reality as both an accessibility and a diversity / justice issue. Students in the new BA/MA will demonstrate outcomes through oral performance, storytelling, local case work, and other contextually appropriate practices. AI will provide multilingual access to content, while faculty mentors focus on presence and contextual facilitation rather than content delivery. Kairos aims not merely to add supports for oral learners but to redefine what counts as academic quality, so oral learners can earn degrees on their own epistemological terms.

Vision Statements

To conclude the Discovery phase of IAI, I synthesized core values across the stories from each group of schools into collaborative vision statements. These statements aim to represent the spirit of each school group for pedagogical work with diverse student populations. They anchor the Design and Delivery phase below.

Thus far in Discovery, I have identified five broad categories of pedagogical practice, common to both school in Canada and schools in the United States aiming to nurture belonging and flourishing in all students. These included relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies; contextual and justice-oriented pedagogies; flexible, student-centered, and reflective learning design; trauma-informed pedagogies; and structural supports for learning. In a traditional IAI process, a collaborative group may conclude their storytelling with a larger number of story categories than these five, and their story categories would translate more directly into the core values represented in a vision statement.

For this report, I utilized Otter.ai, ChatGPT, and Google Gemini to review all transcripts from Level 1 and Level 2, suggesting robust vision statements with a greater number of core values than those represented by my five categories. I wanted to ensure I had not overlooked important nuances the statements could include. The vision statements below thus include terms from the broad key categories as well as specific values suggested by generative AI and validated by my comparison to story insights. Ultimately, I compiled suggestions from each AI platform into statements that I felt best represented each school group.¹⁵

The values emphasized in each statement are italicized below:

- **Schools in Canada**

Our vision is to cultivate transformative theological schools where education is an act of *communal hospitality* and *humble curiosity*, rooted in the *wisdom of the land* and the *diverse cultural assets* of every student. By shifting toward *relational, co-shaped pedagogies* and *holistic formation*, we *empower* leaders to integrate *deep listening* with *courageous practice* in a multi-voiced world.

- **Schools in the United States**

We envision graduate theological schools as *communities of belonging* where every learner's *dignity and story* are honored as essential gifts that reshape teaching and institutional life. Grounded in *radical hospitality, mutual accountability, relational trust*, and *shared power*, we commit to cultivating learning environments where *intercultural wisdom, decolonial awareness, and contextual responsiveness* form communities capable of transformative faithfulness together.

Per the IAI process, after reflecting on stories shared, identifying key categories and/or core values, and constructing a vision statement, it is time to enter a Dreaming phase. As Uncle Terry mentioned, the work cannot stop with storytelling or the construction of a vision statement. The practice of building mission statements often will not result in operational, iterative next steps. The process must continue instead with the phases of Dreaming, Design, and Delivery.

“Our students can get the best content in the world on the Internet for free. They don’t need faculty for content. They need faculty for figuring out what to do with that content.”

—U.S.A., ATS evangelical school

15. Participants were aware I might utilize generative AI to analyze data, and I closely edited all content to confirm the results I share here. I also utilized versions of each of these applications that protect the confidentiality of participants and these insights, versions that do not use participant details to improve their AI models.

Dreaming

In a traditional IAI process, participants again would gather in smaller groups, this time to visualize a next version of their related work. They often will sketch pictures that flesh out core values, or the vision statement, and possible next steps pictorially. If the Discovery process has taken significant time, such as a full retreat or multiple faculty meetings, they will reconvene to engage this phase and begin to connect Discovery and Dreaming with practical Design steps.

For this project, Adriana Contreras Correal¹⁶ served as a graphic facilitator. I shared with her the recordings and transcripts from all Level 1 conversations (10 total, two with each of the five Zoom groups), and she constructed four images to capture insights. Technically, per IAI, she built another way to see and process Discovery insights. I share her work as part of the Dreaming phase to underscore how helpful graphic depictions can be. For faculty engaging the IAI process on their own, their depictions would be contextual to their specific institutions and bridge toward particular Design hopes. Perhaps the reader can imagine how they might adapt Adriana's images to advance their own pedagogical efforts with diverse student populations.

In the first image (see Image 1, pg. 42), Adriana captures key themes across all conversations, from both Canada-based and U.S.-based schools. The second image (see Image 2, pg. 42) underscores several pedagogical sparks, or particular practices, that emerged in the schools' stories. A third image (see Image 3, pg. 43) emphasizes pedagogical responses from Canada-based schools to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for schools and churches. In the fourth image (see Image 4, pg. 43), Adriana reflects on participants' responses to the final core question for Level 1, which emphasized their experiences of the study and their thoughts on what resources they still need to enhance pedagogical imagination for serving diverse students.

This first image (Image 1) highlights five key themes (in green): the influence of cultural trends such as diversity in student population, socio-political realities, and technological shifts; the role of system-wide lenses for pedagogical work with diverse populations; the centrality of relationship building; the key function of learning in community; and connections between theory and praxis. It includes woven threads (in yellow) that highlight ways to shape brave spaces that welcome all students to bring their lived experiences into the room, encounter others, and reshape their thinking regarding differences and divisive issues. The boxes along those threads (in peach), including the large box on the right-hand side, begin to identify some pedagogical strategies for belonging and flourishing. Notice the insights scribed throughout the image, including the

I share the work of Adriana Contreras Correal as part of the Dreaming phase to underscore how helpful graphic depictions can be.

16. Adriana Contreras Correal (She/Her) is an Interdisciplinary Artist, bilingual facilitator, and visual scribe. Her practice is rooted in a commitment to social justice at a local and global level. Her role as a Visual Practitioner is to witness, listen deeply, gather information, connect ideas, and tell stories. Originally from Abya Yala (Bogotá, Colombia), Adriana lives with respect and gratitude on the traditional unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations (in the Greater Vancouver Area, British Columbia). Adriana has been part of and has worked in partnership with numerous arts and community-based organizations for over 20 years. She is a member of the International Association of Facilitators, the International Forum of Visual Practitioners, and a certified Cultivating Safe Spaces and SoulCollage Facilitator. See her website, <https://www.mareverso.com>.

highlight in the bottom-right corner that “sharing our faith well” involves a practice of double listening to the Spirit and to contexts.

Adriana’s second image (Image 2) emphasizes seven categories of pedagogical strategy for the belonging and flourishing of diverse student populations. These categories (in green) include somatic practice, practices of self-reflection, land-based learning, circle dialogue, assignments that connect research with praxis, interfaith leadership skills development, and peer teaching. The woven yellow threads from the first image here expand into additional details for these categories. In the bottom right-hand corner, Adriana underscores the value of lived experience as a source of wisdom. The reader might notice which of these strategies they already utilize and which they might incorporate more often into their own pedagogical work. They also might visualize additional categories or additional examples for any of these categories that might best suit their institutional contexts.

Though focused on responses by the Canada-based schools to the TRC Calls to Action, the third image (Image 3) also can inspire justice-related work in U.S.-based schools. The long red root establishes the long-term commitment required to shift paradigms and structures, highlighting key steps (in green) along the way: institutional self-reflection, acknowledgement of the impacts of colonialism, building meaningful and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities, engaging in dialogue, and articulating actions. The green field includes woven yellow strands that this time name concrete actions institutions can engage for TRC-related efforts (in red): advocacy, funding for pedagogies that advance justice, intentional adjustments to program and course design, guidance from Indigenous partners, connection to Indigenous spiritual pathways, and authentic relational practices for collaboration and hiring. Reflecting on this image, faculty at schools in Canada might identify which key steps or concrete actions they would like to embody more deeply. They might add steps or actions that have worked well in their contexts. Faculty at schools in the United States might wonder whether and how they are engaging, if at all, with Indigenous histories and concerns in their locations. Faculty at either Canada-based or U.S.-based schools might imagine how to connect these kinds of concrete commitments to other justice-rooted efforts with various demographics in their institutions.

The fourth image (Image 4) represents participant responses to my questions about what had been useful about engaging in the project and whether they were interested, going forward, to participate in similar cross-institutional conversations. Participants highlighted at least four possible primary functions for such communities

of practice, represented in green: weaving together their perspectives; promoting collaboration across institutions; inviting reflection about the nimbleness of their work; and making visible and normalizing questions, explorations, and struggles. The hands in the image are weaving together threads of community, and the seeds in the background represent the insights still to gather, cultivate, and bloom. Participants would love more opportunities, as indicated in the bottom right (in peach), to advance deeper reflection on pedagogies through shared resources, asset mapping, collaborative exploration of shared realities, and continued connection.

Research as Community of Practice

Adriana’s fourth image helps underscore how a research fellowship can be leveraged not simply to extract key findings but to build and contribute to a community of practice. I had entered the project with this larger goal also in mind, aiming to welcome stories on the Smith (2020) dimension of education/scholarship in ways that effect collaborative impact, just as communities of practice leverage networks to improve domains of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger Trayner, 2015).

Together, the study participants shared a plethora of insights that I hope will spark thoughts for related next steps in pedagogical work. Readers can reflect on how to adopt or adapt practices from the five Discovery categories: relational and belonging-oriented pedagogies; contextual and justice-oriented pedagogies; flexible, student-centered, and reflective learning design; trauma-informed pedagogies; and structural supports for learning. Perhaps a particular quotation or school vignette will inspire a new classroom approach or program design or institutional change. In addition, Adriana’s images may inspire new directions.

Meanwhile, demonstrating how to follow through a full cycle of Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry may be the most significant way this study can impact the broader industry. The IAI process can help institutions contextualize insights from this project for their constituencies, through the vision statements and subsequent Design and Delivery phases. It also can function as a framework for institutions to structure their own Discovery and Dreaming phases before turning to Design and Delivery. I will illustrate the final phases of the process now. As I do, the subtext will be this quest to demonstrate how even short-term research studies, if approached as exercises in communities of practice, can offer constructive wisdom to guide a liminal industry forward. Research projects can have very intentional, immediate, and broad impacts on practice. And Adriana’s fourth image highlights that faculty at ATS member schools are eager for more such collaborative opportunities that advance their pedagogical work.

Image 1: Pedagogical Imagination

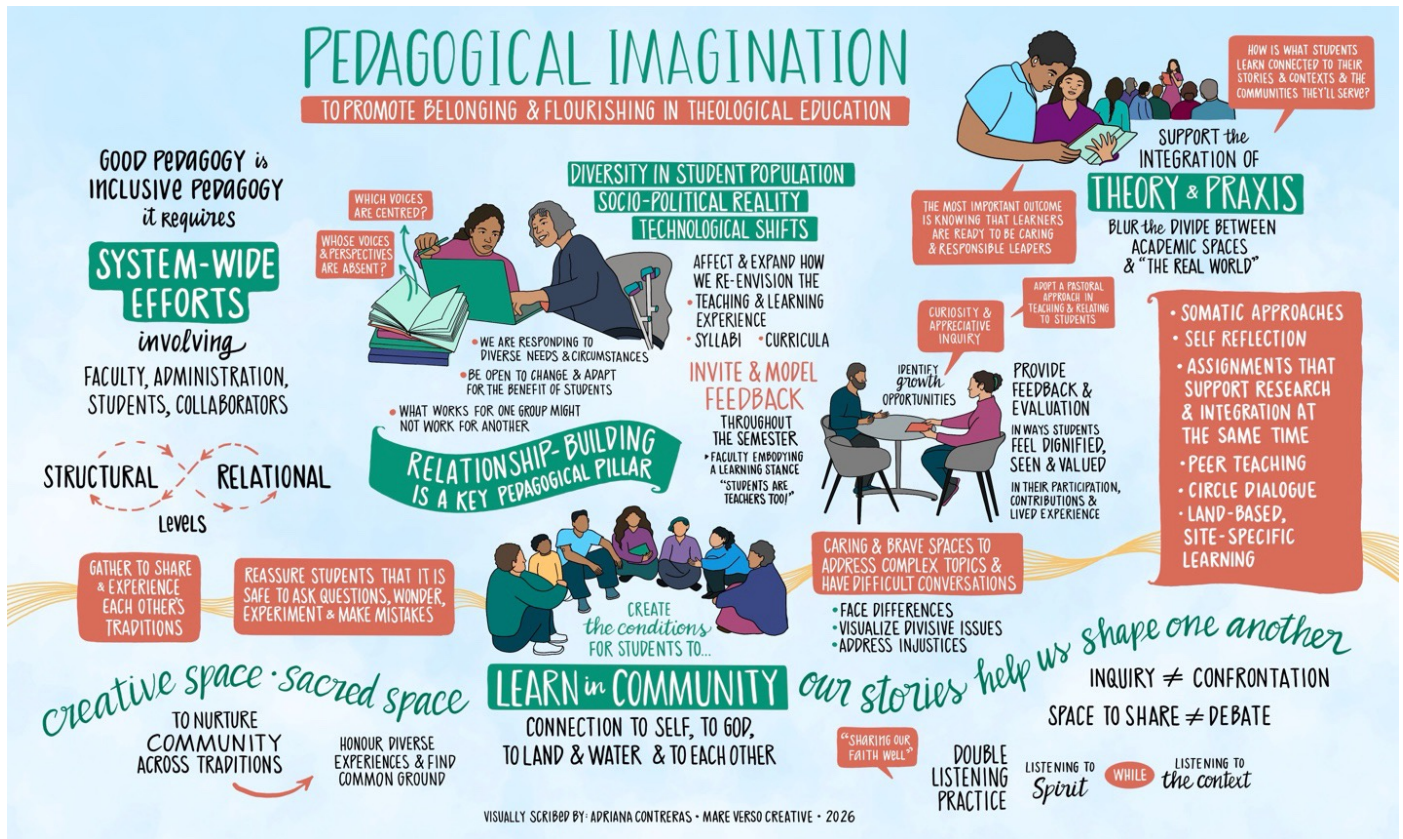


Image 2: Pedagogical Sparks



Image 3: Pedagogical Responses to TRC Calls to Action

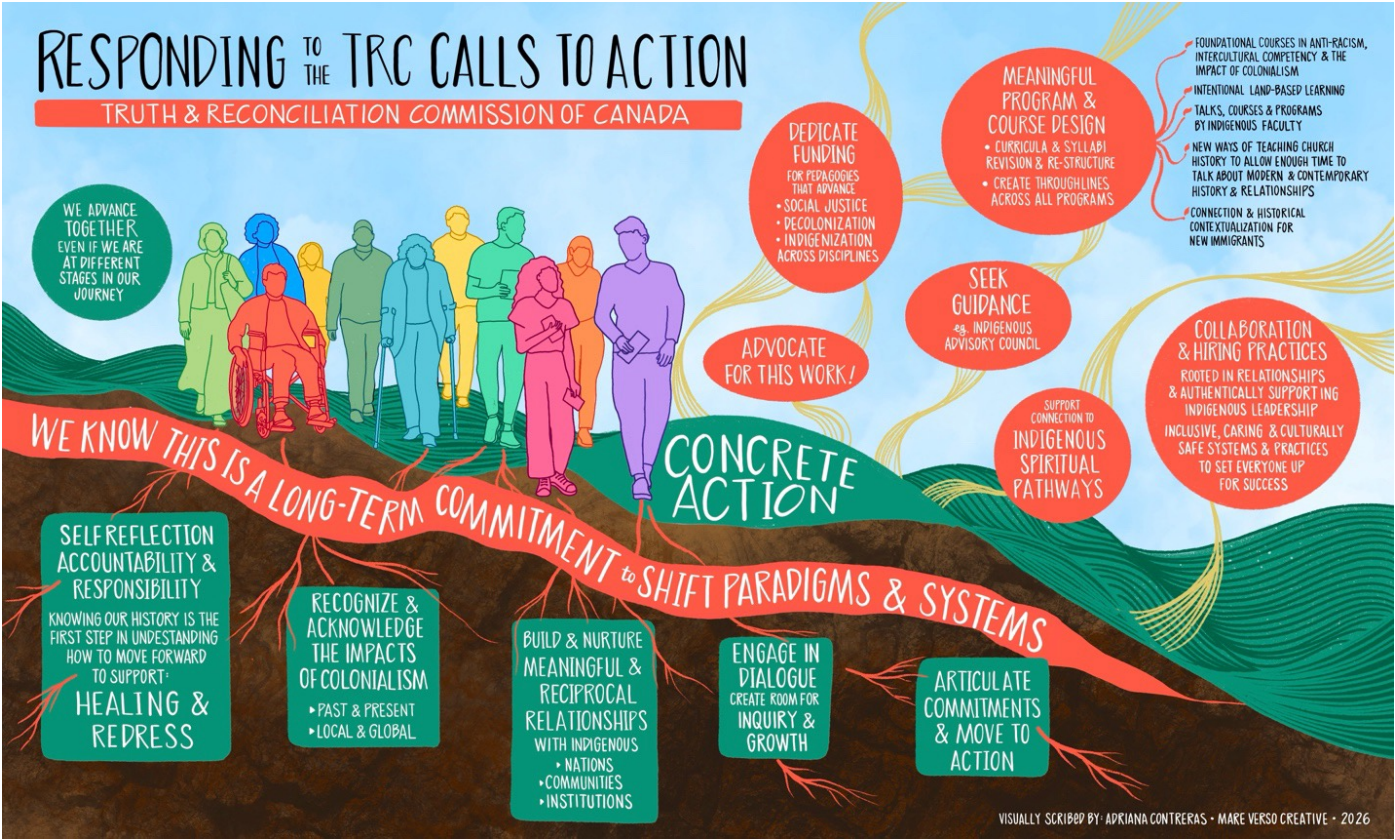


Image 4: Communities of Practice for Pedagogical Imagination



Design and Delivery

Moving from Discovery and Dreaming to Design and Delivery is no small task, and yet, it does not have to be elusive or cumbersome. In IAI, participants use a matrix (chart) system to conceive of concrete ways to operationalize their vision. Participants can chart the common factors from their vision on the X axis alongside areas of inquiry on the Y axis. The matrix helps participants identify necessary people, other resources, or actions to take next steps without focusing on problems or risking stalling overall (T. LeBlanc, personal communications, April and May 2026).

A Design matrix rooted in this study would include core values from the vision statements on the X axis and elements of pedagogical practice (e.g., syllabus, classroom activities, assessments, extracurricular opportunities) on the Y axis. Faculty would determine desired next steps for any or all intersections on the grid.

Canada Matrix

For the Canada matrix (see Figure 3), I built from the vision statement for schools in Canada:

- Our vision is to cultivate transformative theological schools where education is an act of *communal hospitality* and *humble curiosity*, rooted in the *wisdom of the land* and the *diverse cultural assets* of every student. By shifting toward *relational, co-shaped* pedagogies and *holistic* formation, we *empower* leaders to integrate *deep listening* with *courageous practice* in a multi-voiced world.

On the matrix, I listed several core values (italicized above) across the X axis. Along the Y axis, I added class-level pedagogical elements as well as categories for program-level and institutional-level insights. Reflecting on just one of these elements, “classroom activities,” I brainstormed related next steps. I mention these ideas only to illustrate how to complete the IAI process. If I were continuing the community of practice after this study, I would ask participants to collaborate with their colleagues to complete the matrix specific to their institutional contexts.

Under the value of “communal hospitality,” I suggested a fishbowl experience. A fishbowl offers a different approach to content delivery focused not on faculty lectures but student discussion. It provides an opportunity for all students to bring their perspectives into the discussion and take ownership of their learning. In a fishbowl, a small

student group discusses a topic in the center of the room (or online) while other students listen and provide feedback (Munn, 2023). It is a communal and hospitable strategy for processing new or difficult content.

Under “humble curiosity,” I mentioned conversation covenants. Using the Touchstones from Parker Palmer’s Center for Courage & Renewal as a model (n.d.),¹⁷ faculty can begin each new course by establishing space for humility and curiosity among students. Covenants or Touchstones function as gentle “rules” that invite all students to show up fully as themselves and welcome their peers to do the same. They reduce the dominance of one or a few voices in the classroom and encourage all students to replace judgment with wondering or curiosity.

For “relational and co-shaped,” I suggested heutagogy and learning portfolios. Heutagogy is a self-determined approach to learning that gives the student more agency in what and how they learn. Utilizing learning portfolios within or across classes can be a heutagogical method for learning or assessment, cultivating in students a lifelong capacity to make intentional connections between their ongoing learning and the contexts they serve (Porter, 2024b; Porter, in press).

Under the value of “holistic,” I highlighted the affective dimension of learning. Often in theological education, we may prioritize the cognitive and spiritual dimensions. We also regularly encourage students to make connections with practice (the psychomotor dimension). Shaping space for the affective, or the emotional, dimension can be more difficult. These dimensions come from Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Medicine Wheel (Porter, 2024a), and they often help faculty shape program or learning outcomes. Trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, one of the categories of practice highlighted by study participants, prioritize the affective dimension as an essential foundation for learning (Crumpton, 2020; Stephens, 2020).

For “empowering,” I suggested modeling shared leadership and utilizing play pedagogy. One study participant (who happened to be from a U.S.-based, ATS mainline school) emphasized their investment in rebalancing power dynamics in the classroom to model practices that future pastors and other church leaders will need to embody in their own congregations. Another study participant (also from a U.S.-based, ATS mainline school) described the use of play pedagogies to empower communal learning

17. Idea adopted from the Forum for Theological Exploration, who uses a revised and expanded version of these Touchstones for every public gathering and many staff meetings.

in the classroom, even for courses in biblical languages. A womanist pedagogy of play can empower students to engage and dialogue across differences (Lockhart-Rusch, 2025). Using playful pedagogies can reduce participation barriers, awaken student interest, and lead to deeper learning (Forbes & Thomas, 2022).

Finally, for “courageous practice,” I listed the Zoom whiteboard as a method for contextualizing learning. The Zoom whiteboard is an easy method for connecting students, whether in person, online, or both, to engage in collaborative notetaking or brainstorming. Student groups or classes could utilize the whiteboard as a discussion space for connecting concepts with their prior or current ministry experiences. Students can take the risk of trying, with faculty and peer support, to translate biblical, theological, historical, or practical course content into real-time implications and ideas for their work.

United States Matrix

For the United States matrix (see Figure 4), I built from the vision statement for U.S.-based schools:

- We envision graduate theological schools as *communities of belonging* where every learner’s *dignity and story* are honored as essential gifts that reshape teaching and institutional life. Grounded in *radical hospitality, mutual accountability, relational trust, and shared power*, we commit to cultivating learning environments where *intercultural wisdom, decolonial awareness, and contextual responsiveness* form communities capable of transformative faithfulness together.

On the matrix, I again listed several core values (italicized above) across the X axis. Along the Y axis, I retained the same class-level pedagogical elements as well as categories for program-level and institutional-level insights. This time I opted to reflect on the “institutional framework” element to brainstorm related next steps.

For the value “communities of belonging,” I suggested a survey of international students, for example. If a school has not recently made an intentional effort to receive feedback about its teaching and learning efforts across diverse student populations, they could start with a few added questions to the ATS Graduating Student or Alumni/ae Questionnaire, curated and disaggregated (by different demographics) for the specific insights they need. Alternatively, a school could offer a simple survey periodically through a platform like Microsoft Forms.

For “radical hospitality,” I highlight building accessibility. One study participant (who happened to be from a Canada-based, ATS Roman Catholic school) reflected on their frustration that their institution still requires those in wheelchairs to enter through the back door. If a school has not yet (or not recently) reflected on barriers for those who are differently abled, whether physically or neurologically, they could start an internal conversation or engage a consultant to notice needs and imagine responses. Schools with online students can reflect on accessibility barriers for those with vision or hearing differences. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one research-based, practical framework that enhances learning for diverse students, and particularly those who are differently abled (Meyer et al., 2025).

Under “mutual accountability” and “shared power,” I offered alternative approaches to course credit: allowing credits for prior learning (ATS, 2023), adopting a competency-based framework for theological education (CBTE; Anderson & Henson, 2024), and/or pursuing an “ungrading” approach (Rovati & Heron, 2025; Voelz 2024). Each of these ideas can help remove the presumption that the institution or the faculty hold all the power and knowledge. These approaches honor the wisdom students bring into the classroom, deemphasize a particular corpus of knowledge in favor of contextualizable competencies, and/or shift the focus from traditional marks to intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and self-evaluation.

For the value of “relational trust,” I suggested emphasizing faculty or local mentors. Whether utilizing a traditional curriculum or CBTE model, study participants underscored the importance of relationships with students both inside and outside the classroom, especially amidst the rapidly increasing capabilities of generative artificial intelligence (AI). One participant from a U.S.-based, ATS evangelical school remarked that especially in an age of AI, students no longer need faculty to deliver content; instead, they need faculty to help mentor their sensibilities regarding how to navigate content. Schools can consider how faculty can serve as mentors as they teach and/or as extracurricular supports for student formation.

Finally, for “contextual responsiveness,” I suggested redesigning the school internship (field placement) opportunity. Theological field education can function as the “embodied nexus of seminary-based learning,” weaving together courses across the curriculum while serving diverse student contexts. Institutions can shape a more integrative, transformative curriculum focused on holistic formation, utilizing internships as a coherent and consistent touchpoint (Lizardy-Hajbi, 2021).

Delivery

Faculty utilizing either of these matrices could opt to include additional core values on the X axis or other pedagogical elements on the Y axis. They could follow one element all the way across, as I did in the examples above. They could follow one value all the way down, identifying how they might strengthen that value across all elements. They could complete the whole matrix for a comprehensive assessment of best next steps in their pedagogical efforts with diverse student populations.

Importantly, faculty could brainstorm ideas as small or large as they need in any moment and then return to the matrix on multiple occasions to develop additional next steps. In this sense, the IAI process is a version of the improvement cycle (Langley et al, 2009). For example, from the Canada matrix: for communal hospitality, what classroom activities might faculty try after the fishbowl is successful? Or from the U.S. matrix: after an institution has surveyed its students, what other steps might help it shape pedagogical spaces of belonging? Over time, faculty might update the core values or add pedagogical elements, but most importantly, they would not stop with a single step for any piece of the matrix. Delivery involves trying one step at a time and returning, iteratively, to take deeper dives into each core value.

These Design and Delivery phases of IAI prompt the magic to unfold. IAI can function as an innovation engine for any theological school, on any topic, and Design and Delivery can empower faculty to move from Discovery and Dreaming to an operationalized, unfolding vision. Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry elicits collaborative insights that are ongoing rather than fixed or complete. The process can help faculty structure pedagogical values and practices that remain responsive to students, contexts, communities, and the movement of the Spirit.

And when explored through the lens of IAI, pedagogical imagination might not comprise isolated innovations so much as perichoretic cultures of listening, relational accountability, reflection, and adaptation.

Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry elicits collaborative insights that are ongoing rather than fixed or complete. The process can help faculty structure pedagogical values and practices that remain responsive to students, contexts, communities, and the movement of the Spirit.

Figure 3: Canada Matrix

CANADIAN SCHOOLS		communal hospitality	humble curiosity	relational, co-shaped	holistic	empowering	courageous practice
	syllabi						
	classroom activities	try a fishbowl experience	establish conversation covenants	heutagogy / learning portfolios	make space for the affective	model shared leadership / play pedagogy	Zoom whiteboard; contextualize
	assessments						
	extracurricular opportunities						
	program-level						
	institutional framework						

Figure 4: United States Matrix

AMERICAN SCHOOLS		communities of belonging	radical hospitality	mutual accountability	relational trust	shared power	contextual responsiveness
	syllabi						
	classroom activities						
	assessments						
	extracurricular opportunities						
	program-level						
	institutional framework	survey international students	assess building accessibility	give credits for prior learning	add faculty or local mentors	adopt CBTE or "ungrading"	redesign internship

Conclusion

Across the Barbara Wheeler Fellowship research project on pedagogical imagination, one insight surfaced repeatedly: theological schools are not merely adapting instructional techniques to accommodate changing student demographics. They are reimagining the very purpose and posture of theological education.

Participating schools consistently emphasized that meaningful theological education must attend to complex diversities and holistic formation. Faculty described pedagogical practices attentive to the lived realities students bring into the classroom: cultural, ethnic, and racial differences; geographic locations and migration stories; denominational commitments; experiences of trauma or exclusion; diverse learning needs; and varied vocational hopes. These practices emphasized belonging, justice, flexibility, trauma awareness, and structural supports for learning. Diversity, in these stories, was not simply a demographic fact to acknowledge or a challenge to manage; instead, it was a generative context for deeper learning and renewed imagination about what faithful theological education can become.

This pedagogical study extended the work of my first study on the ATS Cultivating Educational Capacity initiative, moving from questions of institutional definition and measurement toward the lived pedagogical practices that help institutions embody their commitments. The Four-Fold + MARED tool invited schools to clarify what they value and how; this study explored, more specifically, the embodiment of those values within the education/scholarship dimension. It adds another key resource to a conversation on how to serve diverse populations of students well, dovetailing too with recent ATS efforts via the “ATS Survey of Deans: Adapting to Changing Student Demographics” and “appreciative diversity consultations.”

What emerged, ultimately, was a vision of theological education not as the transmission of abstract expertise but as participation in a more perichoretic way of living and learning together, one marked by relational accountability, shared power, humility, and hope.

Just as importantly, this research project illustrated how research itself can function as a communal and practical exercise rather than as a detached academic product. Participants did more than contribute information to a study. The conversation circles became spaces in which faculty recognized shared commitments, learned from one another’s experiments, surfaced common tensions, and identified practical possibilities for future action. In this way, the project functioned as a modest community of practice in action. By organizing insights through the lens of Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry, the report also sought to model a process that schools themselves might adapt: beginning with story and identifying shared core values (Discovery), imagining faithful possibilities together (Discovery and Dreaming), and then moving toward practical, iterative next steps (Design and Delivery). The goal was not to arrive at universal best practices or static solutions, but to encourage schools to continue the ongoing work of listening, experimenting, reflecting, and adapting within their own contexts.

I began this report with reflections on *hesed*, God’s steadfast love, and Dr. Justo González’s reminder that theology is best done “with dirt under one’s fingernails” (1990, p. 129). Across these stories, faculty repeatedly pointed toward pedagogies that are similarly grounded, contextual, and relational. They described educational practices shaped not only by content mastery but by accompaniment, mutuality, courageous listening, and communal discernment. What emerged, ultimately, was a vision of theological education not as the transmission of abstract expertise but as participation in a more perichoretic way of living and learning together, one marked by relational accountability, shared power, humility, and hope. If theological education is concerned with forming communities capable of faithful presence in a diverse and fractured world, then perhaps one of its most important pedagogies is the ongoing practice of discerning together how to embody steadfast love in institutional and communal life, through processes like IAI.

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Appendix A: Additional MARED Detail

Goals of MARED (adapted from Cascante-Gómez, 2008)

- To broaden and deepen the understanding theological schools have of issues related to racial/ethnic diversity inside and outside their institutional context;
- To help theological institutions assess the impact of their present understanding of racial/ethnic diversity in their mission, organizations, policies, practices, academic programs, community life, and teaching and learning dynamics;
- To encourage institutional and individual actions that will move theological schools to become more congruent with their theological, biblical, and pastoral convictions about racial/ethnic diversity;
- To promote the creation of a permanent institutional structure that values and works for the continuous evaluation and development of racial/ethnic diversity within and beyond academic institutions.

MARED Readiness Test (Cascante-Gómez, 2008)

- How are instances of racial/ethnic discrimination handled in the institution? Are there policies in place to guide institutional actions?
- Is social diversity valued in the seminary? At all levels? In which ways?
- Is there an explicit commitment to social justice? Where can it be found?
- Has the leadership of the school made it known to all its constituencies that social justice is a value supported in the institution? How? To whom has it been made known?
- How well does the leadership model its value for diversity and social justice? For instance, how well does the theological faculty model values for diversity and social justice in their courses and classroom dynamics?
- Is a commitment to diversity and social justice clearly stated in the mission and values of the seminary? Are there other places within official documents of the institution where that commitment can be found?

Appendix B: The Four-Fold MARED Tool

The below two-page resource supports ATS member schools to define and measure institutional efforts regarding diversities. For more information or to print a copy, see the In Trust Center for Theological School's podcast, "Episode 39: Starting the Diversity Discussion."

Front Side

The tool begins, on the front side (Figure 5), by asking participants to reflect on the six MARED categories: exclusionary, club, compliant, affirming, redefining, and multicultural. It invites them to list stakeholder types, constituencies, departments, or programs at their institutions that embody the categories of the MARED continuum (see Question #1). Next, it asks participants to notice which category of MARED seems most common at their institutions now and to describe how they know (Question #2). It then asks participants to suggest which MARED category might be ideal for their institutions in three to five years, whether they would recommend a change of category, and why or why not (Question #3). Finally, it invites them to imagine how they can explore further by investigating official documents, meeting minutes, surveys, informal conversations, etc. that could inform their responses (Question #4).

Back Side

The tool continues, on the back side (Figure 6), to engage Smith's (2020) framework. It asks leaders to choose one metric from each of the four dimensions, such as education/scholarship, and imagine versions of those metrics or related short-term targets that could track progress toward their institution's preferred MARED category. It concludes with an encouragement to imagine one or two next steps for their institution's diversity work.

Figure 5: Four-Fold MARED Tool, Front Side

“**exclusionary**”

devoted to maintaining the majority group's dominance and privilege as are usually manifested in the institution's mission and admissions policies for staff, faculty, and students;

hostile to anything that might be seen as a concern for social justice or social diversity in the institution (or department) and, therefore, very likely not interested to consider any change toward becoming multicultural.

”

“**club**”

implicitly maintains the privileges of those who have traditionally held power, by:

establishing mission statements, policies, [etc.] from the exclusive perspective of the power-holders;

admitting limited numbers of people from racial/ethnic groups as long as they submit to the institution's perspective and have “appropriate” credentials;

committing to issues of social justice as long as it is convenient and does not cause any disturbance.

”

“**compliant**”

responds to outside pressures but is not fully convinced that it is important to pay attention to issues of social justice;

provides access to previously excluded members of racial/ethnic groups “at the bottom of the system” or as “exceptionally qualified” hires;

does not allow for significant changes in response to increased demographic diversity;

does not challenge majority's biased attitudes and behaviors against racial/ethnic groups.

”

“**affirming**”

explicit awareness of importance of social justice, grounded on sound theological and biblical principles and reflected in congruent policies and practices;

committed to eliminating discriminatory practices and inherent advantages of majority;

recruits and promotes members of racial/ethnic groups at all levels;

implements programs to support success of minorities;

encourages thinking and behaving in a nonoppressive manner.

”

“**redefining**”

not fully content with being nonexclusive and nonoppressive, and works to learn from diversity;

goes beyond managing diversity to capitalizing on it in all areas;

looks for ways to ensure full growth of all perspectives to enhance effectiveness;

questions the reality of relying on one cultural perspective to drive institution, and distributes power among diverse groups;

plans for new ways to welcome inclusion, participation, and empowerment of all members.

”

“**multicultural**”

multiracial/multiethnic institution; moves beyond internal efforts to support efforts for social justice in larger society;

reflects interests of diverse groups at academic, institutional, and communal levels;

eradicates social oppression in all forms within the institution;

includes members of diverse groups as full participants in institutional decisions;

supports efforts in broader community to eliminate discrimination.

”

monocultural

non-discriminating

multicultural

1

In the spaces above, list stakeholder types, constituencies, departments, or programs at your institution that embody the categories of the MARED continuum.

2

Where are we?

Which MARED category seems most common at your institution right now? How do you know?

3

Where do we want to be?

Which MARED category might be ideal for your institution in 3-5 years? Would you recommend a change of category? Why or why not?

4

How can we explore further?

What data (official documents, meeting minutes, surveys, informal conversations, etc.) could you explore or collect to inform your responses?

THE MARED FRAMEWORK

Model for Advancing Racial / Ethnic Diversity

for more detail, see Cascante-Gomez, F.A. (2008). Advancing racial/ethnic diversity in theological education: A model for reflection and action. Theological Education, 43(2), 21-39.

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Figure 6: Four-Fold MARED Tool, Back Side

Access / Success
 population of diverse students by type of degree
 success of diverse students (persistence, honors, graduation)
 (disaggregated by racial/ethnic group)

Education / Scholarship
 availability of diversity-related courses and requirements
 extent to which courses include diversity issues
 student involvement in diversity-related courses
 student research that engages the diverse society
 quantity and substance of student learning about diversity
 student final projects or dissertations related to diversity
 faculty expertise on diversity-related matters
 faculty involvement in diversity efforts
 faculty research and publishing involving diversity

Viability / Vitality
 diversity of faculty/staff
 board diversity and engagement
 institutional history on diversity issues and incidents
 institutional strategies and resources for diversity
 centrality of diversity in institutional documents and processes
 public constituency perceptions of institutional diversity, equity
 framework and indicators re: diversity

Climate / Intergroup
 perceptions of institution (climate, fairness)
 quality of experience (engagement on campus and/or satisfaction)
 type and quality of interactions among diverse groups
 (disaggregated by racial/ethnic group)

THE FOUR-FOLD FRAMEWORK
 Institutional Capacity for Diversity
 for more detail, see Smith, D.G. (2020). Diversity's promise for higher education: Making it work (3rd ed.). Johns Hopkins Press.

dimension **metric / target for justice**

Access

Viability

Education

Climate

What now?
 Describe one or two next steps for your institution's diversity work.

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with
love*



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