

New student data questionnaires online now!

An interview with Helen Blier, outgoing Director, Student Information and Organizational Evaluation of ATS

In use since 1996, the questionnaires for entering and graduating students have been substantially revised, along with the alumni/ae questionnaire added in 2007. The revisions reflect the changing landscape of theological education and better align with the latest accrediting standards as well as stepped-up requirements to



assess educational effectiveness. Specific changes include revised debt ceilings, inquiry into educational delivery methods, more in-depth recruitment data, and targeted information about placement and bivocational ministry plans. Helen Blier, outgoing director, student information and organizational evaluation, tells about the new Qs and how they will better serve the current needs of member schools.

Why now?

The Qs are reviewed and revised regularly. Sometimes data categories simply needed to be updated; for example, debt loads have been rising consistently, so we knew we need to raise the maximum debt amount reflected in the surveys. This time, however, we had three major influences that drove the revision process: the rise of nontraditional educational delivery methods, the increased emphasis on educational effectiveness assessment, and the recent revisions to the Commission standards. The data are only as valuable as they are relevant and useful for assessment, so the Qs needed to reflect these changes.

How did you determine what changes needed to be made?

Over the past six years since the last revision, I had been collecting suggestions sent by users of the Qs. In addition, I had the Student Resources Advisory Committee and other experienced coordinators review and approve the proposed changes. We have also been collecting the customized questions crafted by schools to address their particular needs; we reviewed all of those for incorporation into the basic list of questions. In the process, we noted what information wasn't being addressed. We are confident that the revisions will be reflective of the needs and best practices of the full range of the user community.

How are changing patterns of educational delivery reflected in the new Qs?

The AQ has always asked about which educational delivery method students used during their time in theological school. Now the ESQ asks incoming students about their preferred format for learning. Will they commute? Are they interested in evening classes? Do they prefer traditional daytime classes on a main campus? Distance or hybrid learning? This will give schools helpful data to inform their deliberations as to whether to move into nontraditional education modes. The ESQ also asks whether the delivery mode impacted a student's decision to attend a particular school.

Similarly, the GSQ now collects data on how students received the majority of their education, along with all educational delivery modes they have experienced throughout their theological school degree programs. The new report for the GSQ uses these data as a variable when reporting student satisfaction with educational effectiveness and school services. This means that schools will now have a quick diagnostic comparing the experiences of students in their traditional and nontraditional programs. The data are indirect, but they can point a school in an important direction of inquiry.

How do the new questions address issues related to recruitment?

Recruitment is such a crucial issue for schools, and the methods by which students are attracted to institutions have changed significantly since the last revision to the questionnaires. The new ESQ now asks more targeted questions concerning how students gather information about schools and how they finally decide to enroll. For example, not too many students return post cards anymore. But there are a variety of Internet, face-to-face, and social media means by which they get the information they need. The ESQ will now track that.

Fast-forward to the end of a student's time in seminary. How are data gathered about placement and bivocational ministry plans?

Anybody who is aware of what is going on in higher education knows that placement has become an enormous issue. The Department of Education now considers it to be an indicator of educational effectiveness. Beyond that, it is a stewardship issue. Ironically, vocational discernment and career placement have been the most poorly rated student services across the Association. According to Standard 6, section 6.5, schools have a responsibility to provide "appropriate assistance" to students seeking employment. But experience tells us that students have a variety of motivations for attending seminary. The GSQ inquires about whether graduates have been placed, whether they wanted to be, and what their experiences were with placement services, if appropriate. This will provide schools with more robust information about the guidance and placement needs of their students.

It would seem that this revision was your final major priority before leaving ATS to take a position at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Is that just a coincidence of timing, or is this work just that important?

No, the revision did not drive me out the door! The decision to revise the Qs was made a year and a half ago, and the revision process itself has been underway for almost a year. When I received my new appointment, I knew that the new Qs would launch on August 1. PTS was extremely generous in allowing me to delay my start date until after the revision process had been completed.

With your departure, who will be the day-to-day contact for this work?

Linda Griffin will continue to provide administrative support for the Qs and will know how to direct questions to others, if necessary. In addition, the student data pages on the new ATS website feature a number of helpful resources, including archived webinars and an updated guide to using the Qs in the self-study process.