

MINING THE MOTHER LODE

How to position student information as a key assessment tool

Currently, 105 of the Commission's 241 fully accredited schools have pending actions regarding assessment. Yet schools are sitting on a mother lode of data that could be mined to provide specific and defensible measures of how well they are doing in educating and serving their students. Student information professionals have the opportunity to share those data to enhance not only the self-study process but also ongoing institutional planning.

A robust assessment plan requires the use of both direct and indirect data. The Entering Student, Graduating Student, and Alumni/ae Questionnaires (ESQ, GSQ, and AQ) are one valuable source of indirect data that should be included in the plan. Roughly 65 percent of ATS member schools are using the questionnaires, and at least a quarter of those schools have sent representatives to the Association's ESQ/GSQ/AQ workshops over the past three years, with many more joining through webinars. But while many report in their self-studies that they are us-

ing these tools, few actually report out the gathered data points. A decade ago, it was very rare for assessment to be cited for follow-up action. Today, 105 of the Commission's 241 fully accredited schools have pending actions regarding assessment, including five imposed notations, nine show causes, eighty-three reports due, and eight authorized focused visits. It would seem that schools have adopted the language of assessment but not a culture of assessment. Yet assessment is a living practice that should be an integral part of the institutional culture.

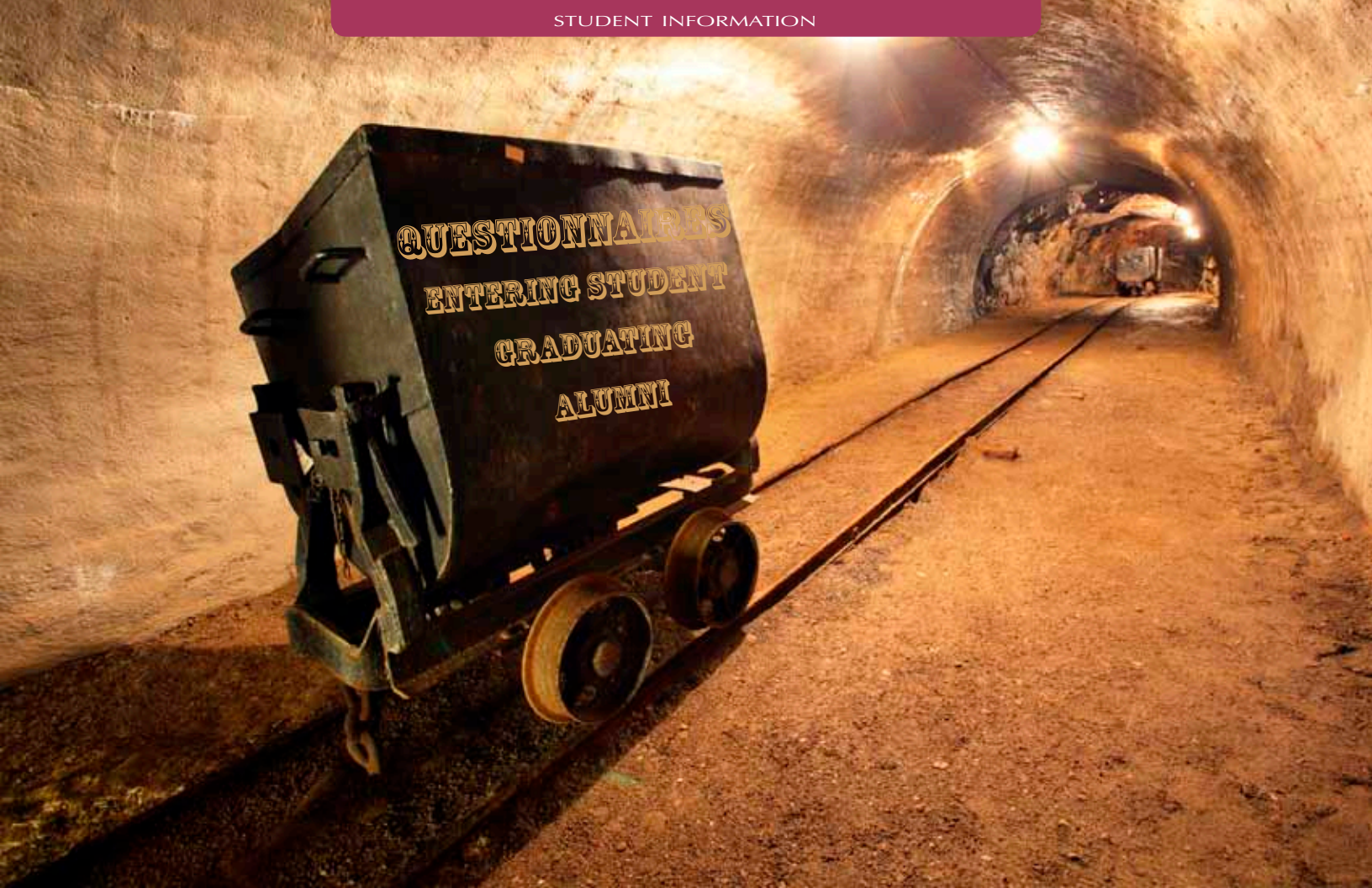
Creating a culture of assessment requires a commitment to (1) data-driven decision making and (2) capacity building among all stakeholders to understand the data and what they are telling us. With increased flexibility reflected in pending changes to Standard 10—pertaining to multiple locations and distance education—and the Degree Program Standards, schools are likely to explore more entrepreneurial options for delivering theological education. And the proposed revisions mandate assessment as a condition for experimentation. As schools venture into new educational territory, it will be even more critical to be on top of the available data to assess educational outcomes, formation, and professional development.

Claiming a voice at the table

So how do those charged with gathering and interpreting student information ensure that this valuable information makes its way into both the self-study and ongoing institutional planning? Access to the process is key, of course, but student information professionals can increase institutional receptivity through three tactics:

1. **At every gathering of administrators and/or faculty, present a few well-curated tables or charts in an accessible and compelling format.** Recognizing the value of data in informing our work, the ATS staff, at every

It would seem that schools have adopted the language of assessment but not a culture of assessment. Yet assessment is a living practice that should be an integral part of the institutional culture.



general staff meeting, concludes with a “Bits and Bytes” presentation that showcases one particular data set and prompts discussion about the implications of that data for the full array of member schools and for our work as a staff. Similar conversations at member schools can be fueled by the wealth of student information data available through the ESQ, GSQ, and AQ. Use the data, interpreted in context, to construct a narrative about your school and its place in the larger world of theological education and the church. Specialized reports—grouping schools by denominational family, for example—allow for benchmarking so schools can assess their performance against a peer group of institutions. On a larger scale, the Total School Profile aggregates the data of all ATS schools and programs, archived and available on the ATS website as far back as 2000–2001.

2. **When suggestions are made for broad courses of action, wonder aloud if the available student data support the validity of the decision.** Listen to the voices of your students as they speak through the data

The ATS staff, at every general staff meeting, concludes with a “Bits and Bytes” presentation that showcases one particular data set and prompts discussion about the implications of that data for the full array of member schools and for our work as a staff. Similar conversations at member schools can be fueled by the wealth of student information data available through the ESQ, GSQ, and AQ.

and think strategically about what they are telling you.

- » If the registrar proposes changing the course schedule, consider the population reflected in the student information data: Are they commuters, full- or part-time students, raising families, working while attending school? How would the particular mix at your school best be served?
- » If the curriculum planning committee proposes a change in the MDiv cur-

Performance and perceptions: A guide to using student questionnaire data in the self-study process

Standard	Section	How to use Student Information Questionnaires
1. Purpose, planning, and evaluation	1.2.2.1 Institutional evaluation 1.2.3 Comprehensive evaluation	Using the instruments, analyzing the data, and reporting data-driven changes and enhancements all demonstrate the use of information gained in evaluation processes for administrative and educational planning.
	1.2.2.2 Degree program evaluation	Standard 1.2.2.2 deals with degree programs and student learning outcomes. Cross-reference this to Standard 3, which addresses the curriculum, and the degree program standards A through I.
2. Institutional integrity	2.3 Accurate representation of institution to constituencies	Are the professional plans of your students consistent with the mission and purpose of your educational programming? See the Professional Plans tables and charts: ESQ—22 GSQ—20, 21, 22 AQ—10, 13, 24 Is there congruence between your students' perception of the theological position of the school and their own? Between their position and your institution's self-understanding? See the Theological Positions table and charts: ESQ—17
	2.5, 2.6 Promotion of awareness and inclusion of racial and gender diversity	How diverse is your student body? Are your graduation rates for racial/ethnic and gender minorities tracking with your enrollment of these students? Check the tables and charts that report Demographics : ESQ—1 through 5 GSQ—1 through 6 Are the satisfaction rates for experience, services, placement, and programming comparable between your male and female students? How comparable are the job histories and attrition rates in ministry? One of the two primary variables used in reporting data is gender. (The other is degree program.) See the Growth and Satisfaction tables and charts: GSQ—12, 13, 18 through 21 AQ—10 through 16 (job history); 19, 24, 27 through 29 (satisfaction)

of schools. How much debt do they bring with them? How much do they have when they graduate? How will that affect their need to find supplemental income while in school or bivocational employment upon graduation?

» Do you know who your students are in terms of age and marital and family status? Are your student services programs matched to their presenting needs?

3. Using the Performance and Perceptions guide to organize data, feed relevant student information to those compiling the self-study. This reference tool (available in the fall 2010 *Colloquy* and on the ATS website) aligns data from the ESQ, GSQ, and AQ with specific sections of the 2010 General Institutional Standards. By sorting the data according to the standards to which they apply, you can provide easy “plug-ins” that self-study authors can simply slip into their reports.

- riculum, consider the professional plans of current students: Do they anticipate careers in parish ministry, mission work, hospital or military chaplaincy, teaching, social work? Do your curricular goals fit their collective aspirations?
- » As decisions are made about recruitment, consider the data on how students identify and choose schools: Do they respond to printed materials received in the mail, search the web, or talk to their pastors and friends? Does your current resource allocation in recruitment respond to that reality?
 - » When strategizing about financial aid and related issues, consider the levels of debt that students collectively bring with them and the relative importance of available financial aid in their choice

Accrediting actions related to assessment fall predominantly in the areas of degree program evaluation and student learning. As the membership lives into the proposed revisions to the Degree Program Standards, consider the data available through the GSQ and AQ on how students reflect upon their satisfaction with the educational experience and the relevance of their earned degrees. While the data collected from these surveys are indirect, they can help provide a useful diagnostic window into the effectiveness of your degree program.

With this mother lode of good information, coupled with the coaching and support available through ATS workshops and online resources, schools would benefit from breaking out of the routine mode, reflecting critically about student information data, and translating those reflections into good practice. ♦