## Bringing data into focus

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At the beginning of the new year, I spent several weeks analyzing and culling through Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) data in preparation for last month's webinar. I created charts and graphs for each of the ESQ questions. I looked at longitudinal data. I sliced data in as many ways as I could think of. I compared data. I created new categories of data. And in the end . . . most of it ended up on the cutting room floor. Hours of data analysis and hundreds of charts reduced to 30 slides . . . well, it should have been 20, but it is all so important!

One of the challenges of data analysis is narrowing and focusing our findings in ways that will be meaningful and useful to the institutions we serve. Here are some of the principles I follow in determining what data to include in a presentation:

- Who is my audience, and what questions are they asking?

Are you meeting with board members? Faculty? Students? Denominational constituents? What are they most concerned about? There are certain data points that everyone asks about: enrollment, finances, vocational goals of students, job placement. What are the questions your audience most often asks? And if you don't know, who can you ask? In our office, when preparing a webinar that might reach a wide audience, I ask a variety of people what questions interest them most—including our chief financial officer, accreditors, former academic deans, and faculty members.

- What is the audience trying to accomplish, and how can data help?

It is helpful to understand the mission and purpose of your audience when you present data. Are they responsible for curricular matters? Then data related to the effectiveness of theological education, the academic preparation of entering students, vocational goals, and interest in online education might be

helpful. Are they responsible for the finances of the institution? Then data related to debt, part-time vs. full-time status, and the effectiveness of various services might be helpful.

- Have there been any significant changes in the data that should be highlighted?

This is particularly true when looking at long-term trends in data. Are there any changes that might significantly challenge current assumptions at the school? Has there been a steady shift in the demographics of the student body? Or in the ways students are finding more information about the school? Or in the types of degree programs students are enrolling in? Do these changes challenge or support current assumptions in your institution about students or programming?

- Do my charts adequately represent the diversity of the data?

You cannot analyze every data point by gender, race/ethnicity, degree program, age, citizenship, part-time status, etc. I try to ensure that the diversity of schools and students are represented throughout a presentation by focusing on data points that highlight something significant about each group. For instance, student debt is a very different issue for Canadian and international students than it is for US citizens. It also differs significantly by race/ethnicity. When talking about academic and vocational pathways, it often helps to break things out by ecclesial family, since Roman Catholic and Protestant students often use different language and have different experiences of ministry. Rather than trying to attend to every diversity for every data point, which variable will be most significant both for the data and for your institution?

- What did I present last year? What needs to be repeated? What needs to be dropped?

I always look at previous presentations to help determine how to focus current presentations. I try to repeat and update slides on critical information, but also on new data points that were recently introduced. I emphasis new themes for several presentations to help reinforce key learnings. I also look for themes that have been addressed for several presentations, data that have become part of the shared knowledge of the community, to determine if anything can be dropped for a while to make room for something new.

Once I've gone through this entire process, I usually still need to cut about a 1/3 of my presentation. There is so much good information out there. And I've spent so many hours working on my charts and graphs. How can I cut more? And so, I go back through my questions one more time. Is this important to my audience? Is this important to our current work? Does this help further our mission? Answer a key question? Represent a missing demographic?

In the end, data are only useful if we can focus them in ways that are meaningful for those we work with at the institutions we serve.