

Assessing student formation: a new set of core assessment tools

The second in a miniseries on student formation, this entry spotlights a new set of tools for measuring formation, featured in another newly published, open-access article on research involving students across a diverse array of ATS member schools.

BY STEVEN J. SANDAGE AND

PETER J. JANKOWSKI

GUEST CONTRIBUTORS

The Seminary Formation Assessment (SFA) can help ATS member schools best support their students' personal and spiritual formation in an ever-evolving, sociocultural landscape. In a project funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the SFA is based on a longitudinal study of more than 1,000 seminary students. ATS member school students are invited to use SFA tools to reflect on aspects of their own formation and contribute to personalized formation plans that track changes over time. Schools can also use these tools to map the terrain of formation within their student community or evaluate formation programming.

The need for formation assessment tools

As noted in the [first article](#) in this miniseries, the ATS [Standards of Accreditation](#) call for schools to attend to the multiple dimensions of student formation and also to regularly evaluate formation outcomes. A 2018 [ATS survey](#) found that member schools use a variety of formation assessment tools but most commonly employ internally developed, "home-grown" tools that have not been research tested. Our recent [review article](#) surveys the various approaches schools have used in assessing student formation and outlines strengths and limitations of each approach. But an important takeaway point is that the field of theological education has lacked a core set of evidence-based, multi-dimensional tools that assess the key aspects of



formation associated with struggles and flourishing among seminary students. We are excited to be able to address this need and help schools focus attention on areas of formation that impact student growth and well-being based on the latest available research.

Description of the SFA suite

The *Seminary Formation Assessment* is a set of core assessment tools grounded in the Relational Spirituality Model (RSM), a widely used interdisciplinary framework for personal and spiritual formation with more than 50 published studies in seminary contexts. The RSM framework highlights the influence of relational dynamics with God or the sacred, others, and self on the developmental processes of personal and spiritual formation. A unique feature of the RSM is its attention to the impact of relational spirituality—ways of relating with the sacred, oneself, and others—on both *suffering* and *flourishing* among students over time and across a diverse range of student formation profiles.

As a set of RSM-based assessment tools, the SFA uses 50 self-report questions, taking about 10 minutes in total to complete, to measure four key dimensions of formation: (1) spiritual dwelling, (2) spiritual seeking, (3) spiritual struggles, and (4) emotion regulatory strengths. (See chart next page).

Formational Dimension (RSM)	Description
Spiritual Dwelling	Aptitude for spiritual grounding, connection, and commitment
Spiritual Seeking	Openness to exploration, questions, and new perspectives
Spiritual Struggles	Dynamics of spiritual conflict, distress, and pain in relation to God, self, and others
Emotion Regulatory Strengths	Capacities to process difficult emotions while tolerating ambiguity and relating flexibly to self and others

Several concise measures within the SFA effectively assess these dimensions, with the RSM framing important relationships among key areas for students and their seminary communities. For example, spiritual dwelling and seeking can form a dialectical relationship in formative tension among some students, while others find ways to integrate the two. Often enough, emphases within a particular theological tradition can also influence the balance of dwelling or seeking. In another example common

among theological students, their own spiritual struggles can play out in differing ways, ranging from significant suffering or formational stagnation, to transformative growth. That said, growth through spiritual struggles typically requires increases in spiritual seeking and emotion regulatory strengths— aspects of personal formation that some students find hard to access without relational supports, which may inform institutional evaluation and planning.

Additional measures

Spiritual practices like prayer, worship, and service are clearly important for formation. However, the RSM highlights the interplay of human-to-human and human-to-sacred relational dynamics that undergird engagement with practices and interact with emotion regulation capacities in facilitating healthy student formation. In addition to the SFA’s core set of assessment tools, we urge ATS member schools to consider two supplemental areas of student formation that have been validated through research: (1) virtues, and (2) sense of community:

Formational Dimension (continued)	Description
Virtues (22 questions, about four more minutes)	Assesses five areas linked to healthy formation and well-being: <i>humility, compassion, justice, forgiveness, blessedness</i> (gratitude and joy)
Sense of Community (13 questions, about three more minutes)	Assesses student experiences of two key facets of theological education— <i>cultural sensitivity, institutional support</i> —and their impact on personal and spiritual formation

Supplementing the SFA core dimensions, these five virtues empirically represent positive “fruits” of healthy formation, which can help schools evaluate how relational spirituality can promote virtuousness and well-being over time. Likewise, the sense of community items tap into a student’s

experience of theological education, revealing a set of factors found to predict both positive and negative formation trajectories. The research clearly shows how vital it is for ATS member schools to understand diverse student experiences and to support the formation of all students.

Designed by and for ATS member schools

As mentioned above, the SFA project started with more than 1,000 students from 18 Christian seminaries in Canada and the United States—Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Historically Black, and Mainline Protestant. We are aware of several (non-ATS) Jewish seminaries that have also participated in recent work to further validate these tools. Now streamlined to 50 core items, the RSM-informed SFA can help ATS member schools better assess student formation by measuring several formational aspects over time—including attachment with God, spiritual struggles, spiritual practice, emotion regulation, virtue, and flourishing. These measures have demonstrated predictive value, making student formation profiles an effective tool for tracking progress toward a school's formation outcomes. They also provide research-backed insight into the combinations of strengths and struggles commonly found across theological education. Schools can use the SFA as a complete set or choose *à la carte* elements that align with their formation goal.

As schools track their own students' formation progress at key moments of their respective theological programs, we as researchers strongly suggest ATS member schools have access to trained professionals who can help students through the work of constructing bespoke forma-

tion plans based on the SFA's quantitative assessment information—in combination with other qualitative sources of input, such as interviews, reflective writing, mentor observations, etc., that help deepen and contextualize the complex process of student formation. In turn, these assessments should be paired with other formation programming, including opportunities for learning through didactic sessions, readings, self-reflection, and engagement with both personal and communal spiritual practices. We are aware of certain ATS member schools that have used versions of the SFA as repeatable measures to track changes and evaluate their institution's formation programs, which can greatly help with quality improvement activities.

Training and consultation available

The task of student learning and formation is a membership-wide mark of excellence in graduate theological education. We want to help your school better assess and improve your formational efforts. Stay tuned for next month's issue for information about how to access the *Seminary Formation Assessment*. In the meantime, if you would like training in the RSM or consultation on the use of the SFA suite of tools, feel free to contact our team by sending an email to ssandage@bu.edu.

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Steven J. Sandage is the Albert & Jessie Danielsen Professor of Psychology of Religion and Theology at Boston University with faculty appointments in the School of Theology and the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. He is also research director and staff psychologist at the Albert & Jessie Danielsen Institute, where he teaches and practices couple family therapy.



Peter J. Jankowski is associate professor of marriage and family therapy at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, MN, and research affiliate in the Albert & Jessie Danielsen Institute at Boston University.

