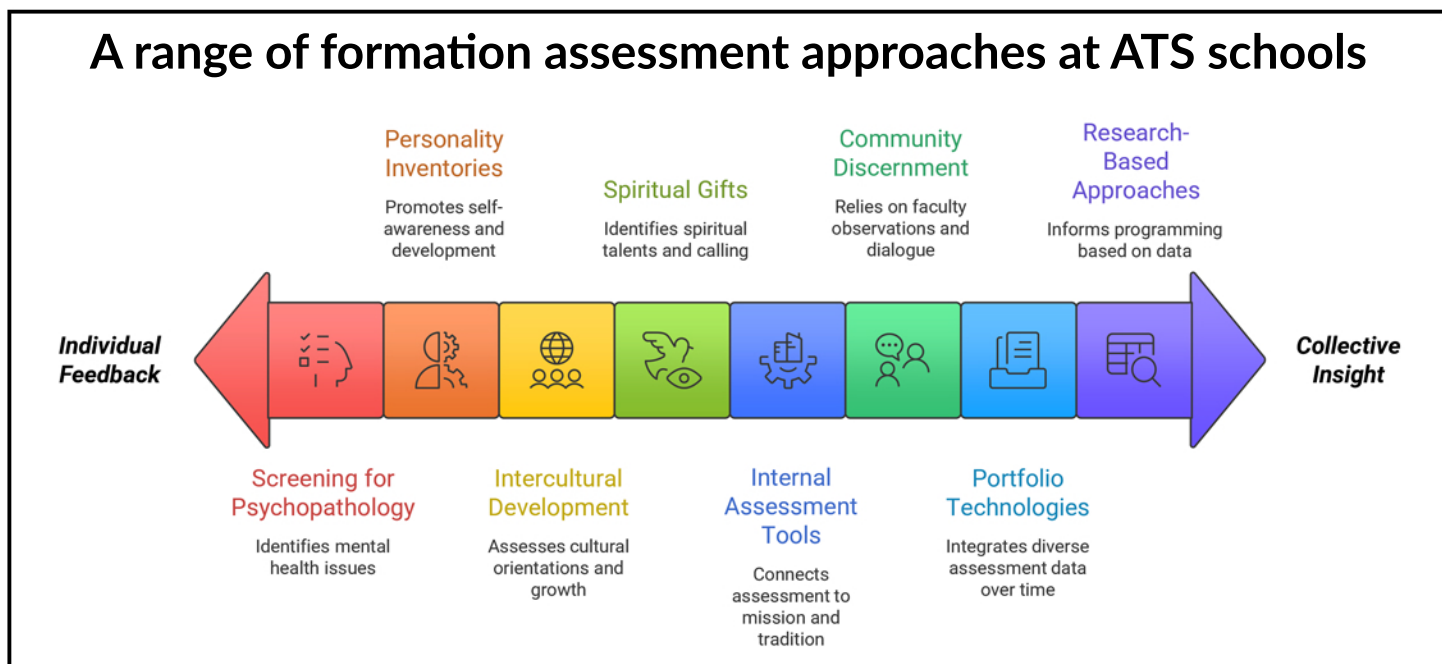


# Assessing student formation: a new overview of approaches and challenges

The first in a miniseries on student formation, this entry spotlights a newly published, open-access research review that offers the most comprehensive overview to date of the ways that seminaries, theology departments, and divinity schools assess student formation.



BY CHRISTOPHER M. THE

*The norms of graduate theological education call schools to attend to the “intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions” of student development as defined in ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA) Standard 3. Yet, measuring growth in areas like faith maturity, emotional resilience, or relational depth is notoriously difficult. How do ATS schools know whether their efforts to promote students’ spiritual formation are actually working? What can we say about the variety of approaches to assessing this process?*

## **Gaps in shared understanding and contextual practices**

In a recently published review article, researchers with the Albert & Jessie Danielsen Institute at Boston Univer-

sity, in consultation with staff from ATS, explore theological school formation assessment methods in the scholarly literature and observed through field experience. By examining current industry practices, their study offers timely guidance to theological schools in need of (re)evaluating student formation assessment methods.

The importance of student formation is widely affirmed in theological education. ATS accreditation standards expect schools to give “appropriate attention” to the multidimensional formation of students. For instance, Master of Divinity (MDiv) programs ought to foster “development in personal faith, professional ethics, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and spirituality” (Standard 4.3). Varying terminology aside, translating these and other normative aspirations into concrete assessment practices can prove difficult for degree and nondegree offerings alike.

The 2025 paper builds on a 2018 survey involving 130 member schools in which ATS Student Data Services found that 96 percent of those schools “had formal learn-

ing goals related to [the] personal and spiritual formation” of most master’s students, yet only 59 percent had a formal definition of formation itself. Almost every school surveyed (90 percent) used an assessment tool of some kind. The most common approach? Assessments that were developed internally (73 percent), a considerable proportion of which used no other standardized assessment—just their “homegrown” tool (31 percent overall). Notably, no single validated instrument was used by a majority of the schools surveyed in 2018.

## ***Eight approaches to assessing formation in theological education***

**Screening for psychopathology.** Some theological schools use clinical instruments like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) to screen applicants or candidates for serious mental health conditions that might impair ministry effectiveness. While this approach may address risk factors, it typically operates separately from broader formation assessment. In addition, schools utilizing the MMPI and similar inventories would benefit from consultation with mental health and legal professionals to navigate anti-discrimination considerations and avoid stigmatizing prospective students or ministers.

**Personality and personal development inventories.** Resources like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), CliftonStrengths (popular with evangelical schools), and the Enneagram (more common at mainline Protestant schools) helpfully facilitate student self-awareness and are in wide use at ATS institutions. While relatively easy to implement and requiring minimal specialized training, schools should be mindful of validity concerns, as the proprietary nature of tools like the MBTI often prevents independent verification of their effectiveness.

**Intercultural development assessment.** Among available options, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) has been used at a number of ATS schools to assess individual orientations to cultural difference. Yet, tools like the IDI, which have been empirically reviewed and offer substantial reliability and validity evidence, often require considerable institutional resources like certified administrators and related financial costs.

**Spiritual gifts assessment.** Spiritual-gifts inventories can be meaningful in preparing (Christian) spiritual leaders. Yet, research has shown limited foundational validity for these resources. Since the diversity of confessional perspectives across the ATS membership inherently complicates the cross-contextual potential of nonvalidated tools, schools are well served to examine the intended purpose for the assessments they use.

**Internal (in-house) assessment tools.** These custom, home-grown instruments allow institutions to connect student formation assessment directly to their unique institutional missions and faith traditions. One challenge is that most in-house tools have not been evaluated for reliability or validity, making it difficult to know what they actually measure—or whether results are comparable across theological education contexts.

**Community discernment.** This relational approach relies on faculty and staff observations and conversations, in dialogue with and sometimes among students. The communal approach—which field experience shows is resonant in many settings, including Roman Catholic, pluralistic Jewish, and other forms of theological education—invites deep personal engagement. Its weakness is that it is challenged by the consistency of assessments when multiple people are involved. The training necessary to calibrate shared criteria, while essential, may be lacking or unsustainably implemented.

**Portfolio technologies.** Some institutions deploy assessment portfolios to organize and integrate multiple sources of formation-related information over time. These often include self-assessments, faculty evaluations, field education feedback, and capstone projects. The strength of such an approach lies in its systematic, integrative nature. Challenges, nonetheless, arise in ensuring sufficient quality across the various data sources.

**Research-based approaches.** A modest yet growing number of theological schools adopt theoretically driven research to assess student formation patterns. These aggregated approaches typically employ validated measures or qualitative methodologies and can inform student-facing programming decisions. A significant down-

side is that the generalizations they yield rarely provide individualized feedback to a student currently in the formational process. These institutions must clearly distin-

guish between research objectives (generating generalizable knowledge) and evaluation objectives (assessing individual student progress).

### ***What to consider when adopting an approach***

Given the variety of methods and tools, how should schools make informed choices? Investing time, effort, and other valuable resources in these processes requires an honest appraisal of what's at stake. Although the 2025 study stops short of recommend-

ing a single best approach—tools are often not mutually exclusive, after all—the research team suggests several considerations that can help guide your school in its decision-making related to student formation assessment.

<i><b>Topic</b></i>	<i><b>Prompt</b></i>
<b>School's goals for assessment</b>	What is the primary purpose of your formation assessment—feedback for students, program evaluation, understanding diverse needs, informing grant work, contributing to research, or something else?
<b>Purpose suitability</b>	Does your current approach actually deliver on your intended purposes, or are there mismatches? How would you know? Is it important for your school to have evidence that its formation assessment instruments measure what they claim, and do so consistently?
<b>Theory, theology, and models</b>	What is the theological framework guiding your student assessment activities? Does your school have an explicit, formal definition of formation? How do activities flow from this understanding?
<b>Student-centered considerations</b>	Do your formation assessment methods work for all student groups, including those from different traditions or backgrounds? How does your school's diversity affect the practicality of using tradition-specific frameworks in assessment?
<b>Contexts for conducting assessment</b>	When and where does your school conduct formation assessments (e.g., orientation, courses, field education, online)? How do these contexts inform your approach?
<b>Expertise and capacities</b>	Who is responsible for student formation assessment, and do they have the training needed? Does your school have the necessary in-house expertise for assessment? Could partnerships with external professionals enhance your capabilities?
<b>Funding</b>	How does your school fund its formation assessment activities? Are currently adopted tools sustainable, or do you rely on funding streams or systems that may not last?

## Choosing tools with purpose and care

Amid the questions the 2025 study raises, the researchers make one thing clear: theological schools benefit significantly from thoughtfully adopting a guiding framework, along with an attendant theory of change, to guide and inform their formation assessment strategy and activities. The paper's authors describe one such model in detail—the Relational Spirituality Model—yet they stress that no single framework fits all contexts. Rather, having an explicit model that is soundly aligned with your school's confessional tradition and formational aspirations is the surest way assessments can be meaningfully connected to student development outcomes.

## An unfolding process

ATS member schools should consider:

- How is your school currently assessing student formation?

- What has worked well, and where have you encountered limitations?
- Are you willing to learn from peer institutions, and how will you respond to their requests for help?

These questions matter for the core mission of preparing leaders who can serve faith communities and broad publics—with moral integrity, vocational resilience, intellectual honesty, human depth, and spiritual vitality.

Share your reflections and experiences of student formation on Engage ATS.

*Editor's Note: The author presented a version of this article's content at a workshop for the 2025 Pathways Coordination Gathering (Indianapolis, IN). The full review article by Steven J. Sandage and colleagues—available now as an open access preprint via DOI: [10.1177/19397909251400405](https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909251400405)—will appear in the next printed issue of the Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care.*



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