

ATS school leaders share strategic uses of data

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

What does your school do with information about a decrease in enrollment from the previous year? Do school leaders compare such a data point to an internal trend line, to data from peer schools, to industry data? Do decision makers gather a team to consider how that information relates to finance data or findings from industry research? Do you take the information to the board? What does your school do with data, and how does the information help the school make decisions about future direction?

The Annual Report Form (ARF) Comprehensive Revision project, intended as a major overhaul of the mechanism to collect institutional data from ATS member schools, has also provided invaluable insight into how schools collect and use data. One [research study](#) looked at how schools fall on a typology of data interest (data-free, data-curious, data-informed, data-driven). The ARF Revision advisory committee engaged in [discussion](#) around why data are important for decision making. [Focus group participants offered feedback](#) on how ATS reports are used in their schools.

I additionally had a conversation with three senior leaders at ATS schools—Joel Kim, president of Westminster Theological Seminary in California; Kenneth McFayden, academic dean of Union Presbyterian Seminary; and Brent Sleasman, president of Winebrenner Theological Seminary—all of whom sit on the ARF Revision Advisory Committee. They shared helpful concrete



examples of how their schools use data in institutional decision making.

Why data are important

“We often use data in our personal lives because we know something is at stake...Using data [in theological education] is about stewardship and not just about reading the numbers,” said McFayden.

As we talked about the roles data play, several emerged: context provider, accountability holder, texture, prophetic voice, and spotlight for needed attention, among others. At the same time, the senior leaders were quick to caution that data do not dictate where the school should go but rather *inform* decision makers as they realize the organization’s mission and vision.

A less frequently referenced but important role of data is “convener.” My conversation partners

and I were particularly struck by an illustrative example summarized by Sleasman in this [short video](#). Over the



Brent Sleasman

last couple of years, the school decided to move to a subscription model for tuition, but the part that inspired the rest of us was how it exemplified an important aspect of decision-making—***data get people together***, not only top decision makers but those on the ground who know best what the data mean and implications of possible decisions.



Kenneth McFayden

Data also play the vital role of “mirror,” reflecting conditions of the organization that others

may see but often go unnoticed by self (think: spinach in teeth). For example, McFayden explained that, acting on a commitment to equity and excellence, the school’s faculty recently decided to look at disaggregated data to ensure that the system was serving students on their two campuses equitably. When data are kept in the aggregate, underlying issues can be overlooked, but disaggregating the data can make visible any hidden challenges.

In another example, Kim described how interrogating the institutional data has helped leaders understand the



Joel Kim

school’s particular charism and make decisions *against the trend*. “Even if contrarian,” the school is now able to make a decision—based on data—to stay the course on the “MDiv or MA” issue.

Why collecting accurate and complete data is critical

Next month, a public draft of the full set of revised ARF forms will be published. Individuals will have opportunity to review how input from representatives from more than 185 member schools (two-thirds of the membership)

have changed and improved the ARF. This occasion forms the perfect time to remind readers of the importance of data quality. Schools can be data-informed; they can also be data-misinformed. It depends on the condition of the data. Consider these scenarios.

Without quality data, peer comparisons would be compromised, and decisions based on the data may be flawed. You may recall this statement in a previous article: “If even one school collects data poorly and reports inaccurate or incomplete figures to ATS, the integrity of other schools’ [peer reports] could be questioned,” said Meryl Herr, lead researcher on a study of data collection and use at 60 ATS schools. “For example, if Fuller Theological Seminary selects Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Trinity International University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Denver Seminary, and Dallas Theological Seminary as its peer schools and one of these peer schools has subpar data, Fuller’s data-driven decision-making process may be compromised by that poor data.”

A second reason to commit to accurate and complete data collection is related to the first—with quality data, other schools can look to you as a peer, as you would be exercising good citizenship within a membership organization. Consider salary comparisons; many schools determine how much they will pay their people based on being “somewhere in the middle” of a range they find in the ATS Annual Data Tables. If a certain segment of administrators were missing or misreported, not only would your own decision be compromised, but the industry’s salary range also would be inaccurate.

Third, when data are complete, research-related questions and findings can be better fine-tuned. Questions such as, “What factors are related to what?” can be better addressed. For example, is increased enrollment truly the silver bullet we assume it is? Another type of question that requires data from more schools is, “What predicts _____?” Fill the blank with a number of possibilities, such as success, longevity, financial health, etc. Research questions that explore patterns of difference are further supported by complete data reporting. These might take

the form of identifying the subgroup of schools where FTE tends to be higher or the five main models of institutional finances and which schools tend to use each. The more complete the dataset, the greater the confidence we have in research findings.

Perhaps the least-known use of ARF data collection are the lists of personnel that ATS staff compile to identify individuals within particular categories—all full-time faculty, CFOs at embedded schools, new student personnel administrators, and administrators of color at evangelical schools, to name a few. We use such ARF data with other sources to invite school representatives to consider participating in ATS events, projects, and accrediting visits, as well as sitting on ATS committees and boards. These lists rely on schools to report complete, accurate, and updated personnel data. Your school and its people

have greater visibility when the data you submit are complete and up to date.

As we move into implementation of the ARF comprehensive revision, it is my hope that all schools take this opportunity for a “reset.” Take a closer look at what you’ve submitted year after year. Are updates to personnel needed? Who else needs to contribute to the data reporting? Can you find ways to submit more complete data that still align with your institutional culture? Your school, your peer schools, and the industry are all better served with quality data.

Watch the complete half-hour recording of my conversation with the three senior leaders. We continue to welcome input on the ARF comprehensive revision any time.



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Watch the recording of the online conversation below!

