

Changing students, changing institutions: four early findings on student demographic change and institutional capacity

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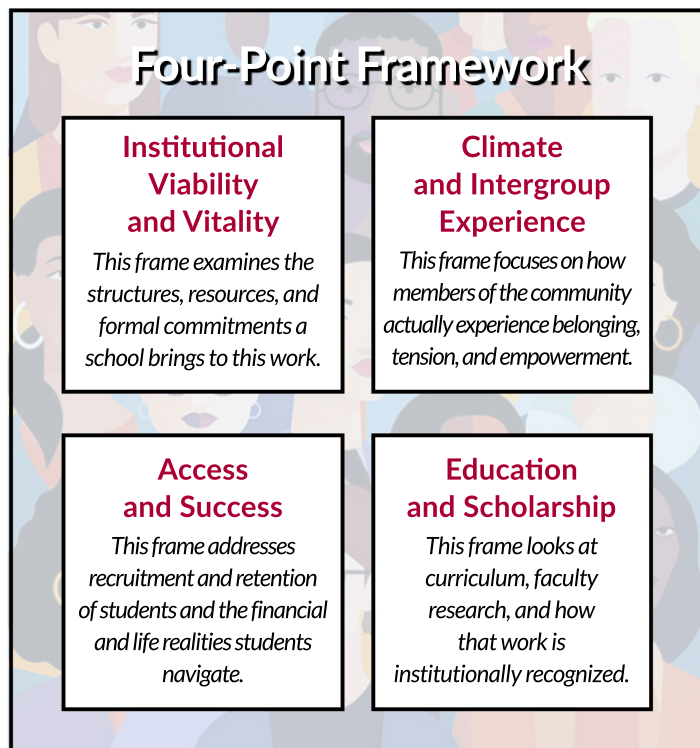
Schools are welcoming—and actively recruiting—students from communities that are new to their context and school culture. What might this mean for schools' readiness to serve these students well and to embrace the different realities and perspectives they bring?

Demographic shifts already in progress

ATS recently launched a study to help schools increase their capacity to adapt to changing student demographics. While these changes vary by institution, ranging from growth among younger students, women, rural ministry leaders, or students from different denominational backgrounds, research suggests that effective responses share common principles.

Demographic shifts are already reshaping many ATS schools.¹ Between 2015 and 2024, Hispanic enrollment across ATS member schools grew from 4,325 to 7,550 students, a 75 percent increase. In Baptist-affiliated schools, Hispanic enrollment grew from 890 to 2,222 students during the same period, a 150 percent increase. While these patterns are not experienced uniformly across schools, they raise important questions about how institutional capacity is evolving to support a changing student body.

To explore these questions, ATS partnered with Future of Faith in fall 2025 to conduct a study of institutional capacity. A spring 2026 survey of deans generated 100 responses from a broad cross-section of schools. Using a four-part framework², the study examined the strengths and challenges schools face in adapting to demographic change. This article highlights key findings from each area of the framework.



One finding stands out from the outset: theological commitments appear to shape institutional adaptability in nuanced ways that do not fit a simple progressive-versus-traditional narrative.

Finding #1: from the Institutional Viability and Vitality frame

Schools are engaging significant adaptation with very limited institutional capacity. In some cases, schools are operating in profoundly constrained contexts (financial, human resource, and other ways). Related to this, we found that very few (20 percent) have a central office or chief diversity officer focused on the work. Yet, almost eight out of 10 (78 percent) rate their institution as having at least moderate capacity to adapt to their changing student demographics.

Important approaches to this adaptation include *written adaptations*, such as having institutional diversity state-

ments (77 percent) or including demographic data in annual reports (64 percent). A smaller proportion of schools also have made *structural adaptations*, such as incorporating measurable demographic goals in strategic plans (52 percent), structuring task forces related to this work to report directly to senior administration (30 percent), or annually reviewing governance structures in response to demographic change (30 percent).

Schools differ on these approaches in both expected and surprising ways. For example, the school's ecclesial family matters in terms of having a diversity statement. Mainline schools are near-universal adopters (94 percent); Evangelical schools trail yet with a super majority (73 percent); and Catholic or Orthodox schools are the outlier (42 percent). An important, surprising finding by school type is that, where efforts to engage across demographic differences are explicitly grounded in theological or doctrinal commitments, schools are more likely to have a diversity statement, and indeed 67 percent of the schools indicate that this work is grounded in their theological commitments. There are particularities in each context that may contribute to these distributions. If increasing adaptive capacity in this work is a goal, schools should consider carefully what those distinctives are and whether they are insurmountable.

While some approaches are more difficult in constrained situations, focusing on key structural adaptations—embedding the work into existing structures and making explicit the school's commitments to serving changing student populations—could be a strategic way to increase capacity without prohibitively impacting their financial picture.

Finding #2: from the Climate and Intergroup Experience frame

Schools report positive campus climate while also acknowledging tension and uneven experiences. A very high proportion of schools say their students (91 percent) feel their needs are met and their faculty and staff (87 percent) feel empowered to address changes in student demographics.

At the same time, more than half (55 percent) acknowledge that some members of the community experience barriers or asymmetry or perceive resistance to efforts addressing demographic change. Indeed, about a quarter report accessibility issues, and about the same indicate religious or interfaith tensions; one in five report racial, gender, or sexual identity discrimination incidents.

We consulted data from other ATS sources to cross-verify findings from this survey. Differences surfaced by race and sometimes by gender. Analysis of ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire data over the last five years (2021-25) shows that smaller proportions of Asian and Indigenous students, and women students, feel accepted within the community.³ (See chart A below).

Similarly, analysis of the 2025 ATS Survey of Regular Faculty indicates that smaller proportions of Black and Latine faculty, as well as women faculty, feel a sense of belonging within the faculty community.⁴ (See chart B, next page).

In addition, experiencing additional service expectations related to the faculty member's identity—expectations

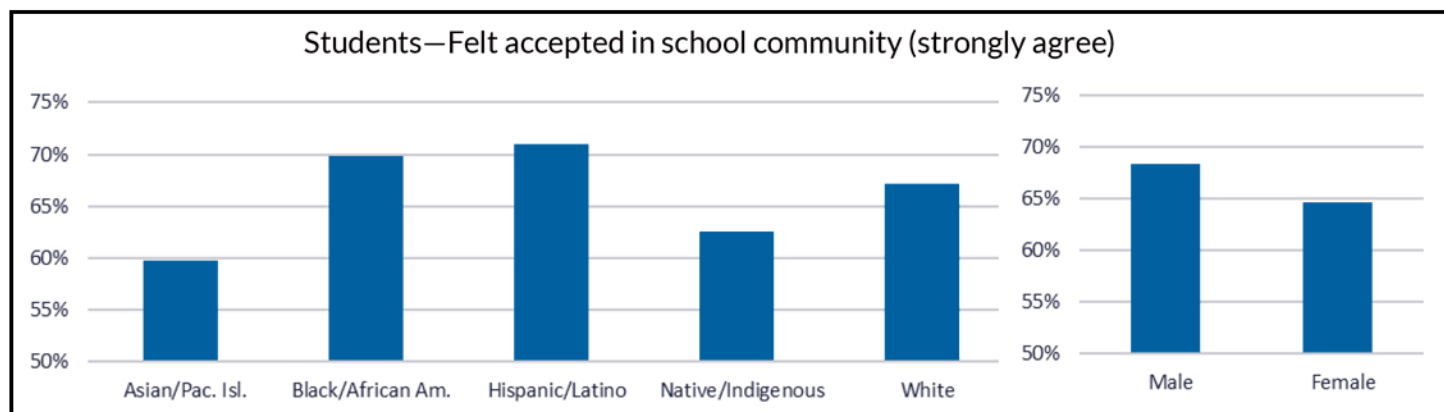


Chart A

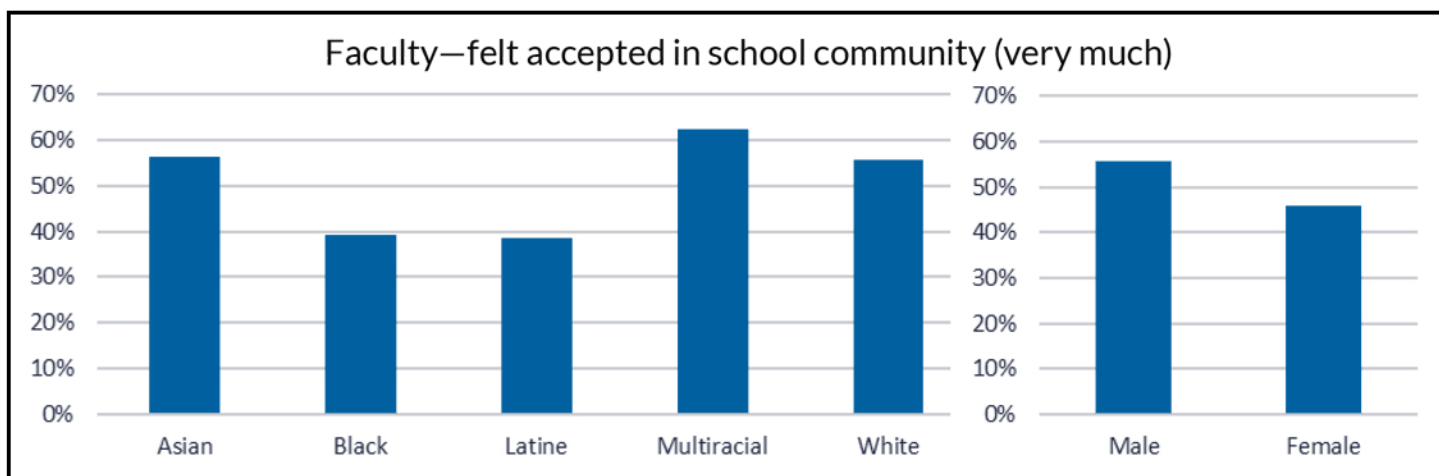


Chart B

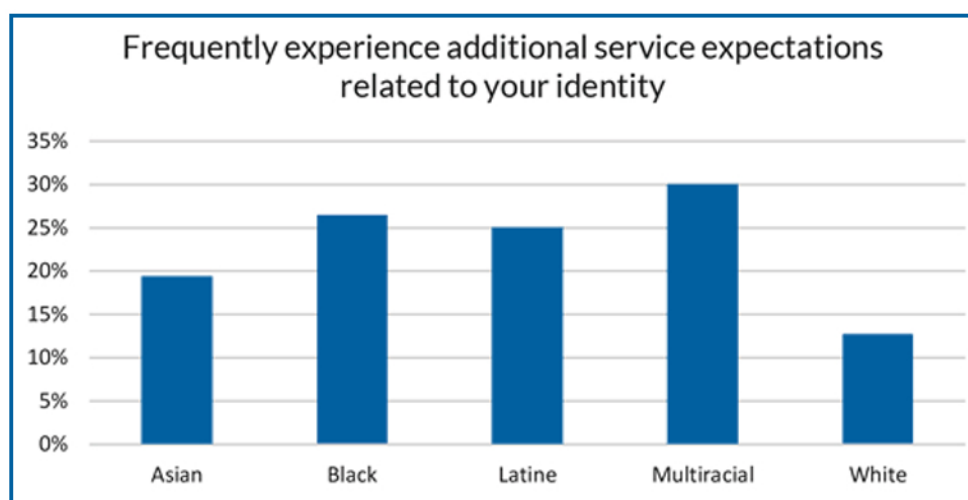
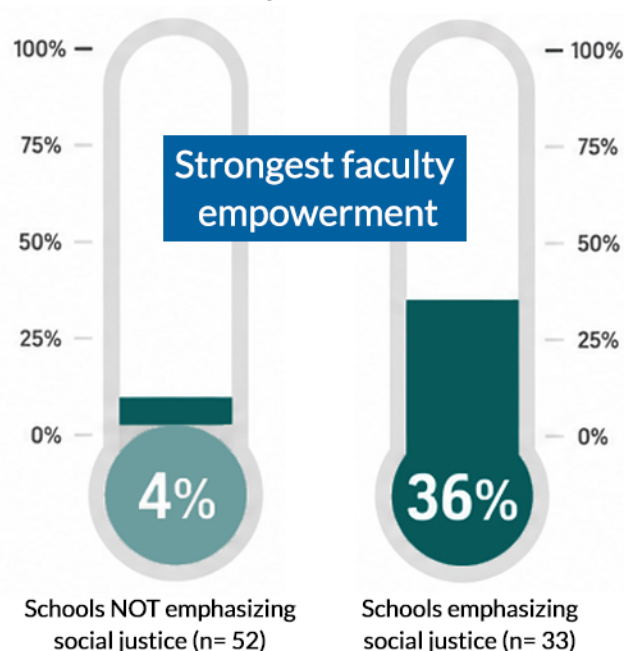


Chart C

that are not formally recognized in tenure/promotion evaluations—differs by race. Asian, Black, Latine, and Multiracial faculty were much more apt to report frequent experience (see chart C above).

Schools' views differ, again, by ecclesial family. A majority of Mainline schools (78 percent) and Catholic or Orthodox schools (63 percent) agree that barriers exist, whereas fewer than half (36 percent) of Evangelical schools agree. Surprisingly, the theological commitments that shape schools' approach to student formation matters in terms of faculty/staff empowerment. Deans were asked to name which of eight (plus "other") commitments most clearly shape their approach to student formation and leadership preparation. Included in the option list were faithfulness to historic Christian tradition, biblical authority and interpretation, engagement with broader society, evangelism and mission expansion, and others. Schools where a commitment to social justice is a foundation to their approach to student formation are far more likely to report their

faculty/staff feel empowered to address demographic change. Well more than a third of the social justice schools (as compared to four percent of the non-social justice schools) report the strongest "empowered" response.



Feeling accepted or having a sense of belonging, as well as unrecognized service load, appear to be experienced differently by demographic group. At the same time, a sense of agency to address adaptation to demographic change differs by type of school, in ways that may not be explicitly connected, such as the school's approach to student formation or leadership preparation. Schools would do well to ask—and keep asking—their constituencies about campus climate and intergroup experiences, including their sense of empowerment to bring about change.

Finding #3: from the Access and Success frame

Schools appear more prepared to address affordability in terms of tuition than the broader realities that students navigate while pursuing theological education. A strong majority of schools report providing supports to make educational pursuit affordable: 87 percent provide need-based scholarships, 73 percent have some kind of flexible payment plan, and 73 percent offer tuition discounts or waivers, all while attending to their organizational financial pictures.

At the same time, students are negotiating multiple responsibilities to attend theological school, and some of these responsibilities differ by various demographics. In the Association's Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers project about a decade ago, we found that certain student groups—by race, gender, age, marital status, and others—experience student debt much more profoundly than other groups, with differing consequences. Older students, for example, were borrowing much more, with much less time to pay off their debt. Such consequences, then, show up differently in terms of the pressures and stressors they bring into the classroom.

Other forms of support are less common, yet they may be in areas salient to students in schools' growing demographic: one out of 10 schools provides childcare support, about a third offer tuition discounts for online programs, and just under half provide some form of stipend or financial assistance for living expenses—another area where we found a decade ago that students, by demographic group, were going into debt.

An interesting finding in this frame is that it is the least

theologically patterned story. Aspects of the school's approach to formation, how the school theologically frames diversity and engagement with difference, the kind of leadership the school primarily prepares its students for, or the school's ecclesial family are not significantly related to items of access or success. Other aspects of the schools also did not prove salient.

Finding #4: from the Education and Scholarship frame

Many schools report substantial curricular engagement with changing demographic realities, while faculty scholarship and institutional supports related to this work appear less widespread.

More than nine out of 10 schools indicate their curricula include topics related to global and cross-cultural perspectives (98 percent) and to race/ethnicity and racial justice (91 percent). In addition, more than eight out of 10 schools (83 percent) report aligning their field education and ministry placements with the needs of underserved communities. Such contextual education and direct incorporation of relevant topics in the classroom are key pieces to adapting to changing student demographics.

Less common, however, is individual faculty, scholarly engagement on these topics. A majority of schools report fewer than a quarter of their faculty conduct research (60 percent) or publish or present scholarship (62 percent) on demographic issues. Perhaps relatedly, fewer than half of the schools (44 percent) recognize or give credit for scholarly activity on topics related to demographic issues in tenure or rank promotion portfolios.

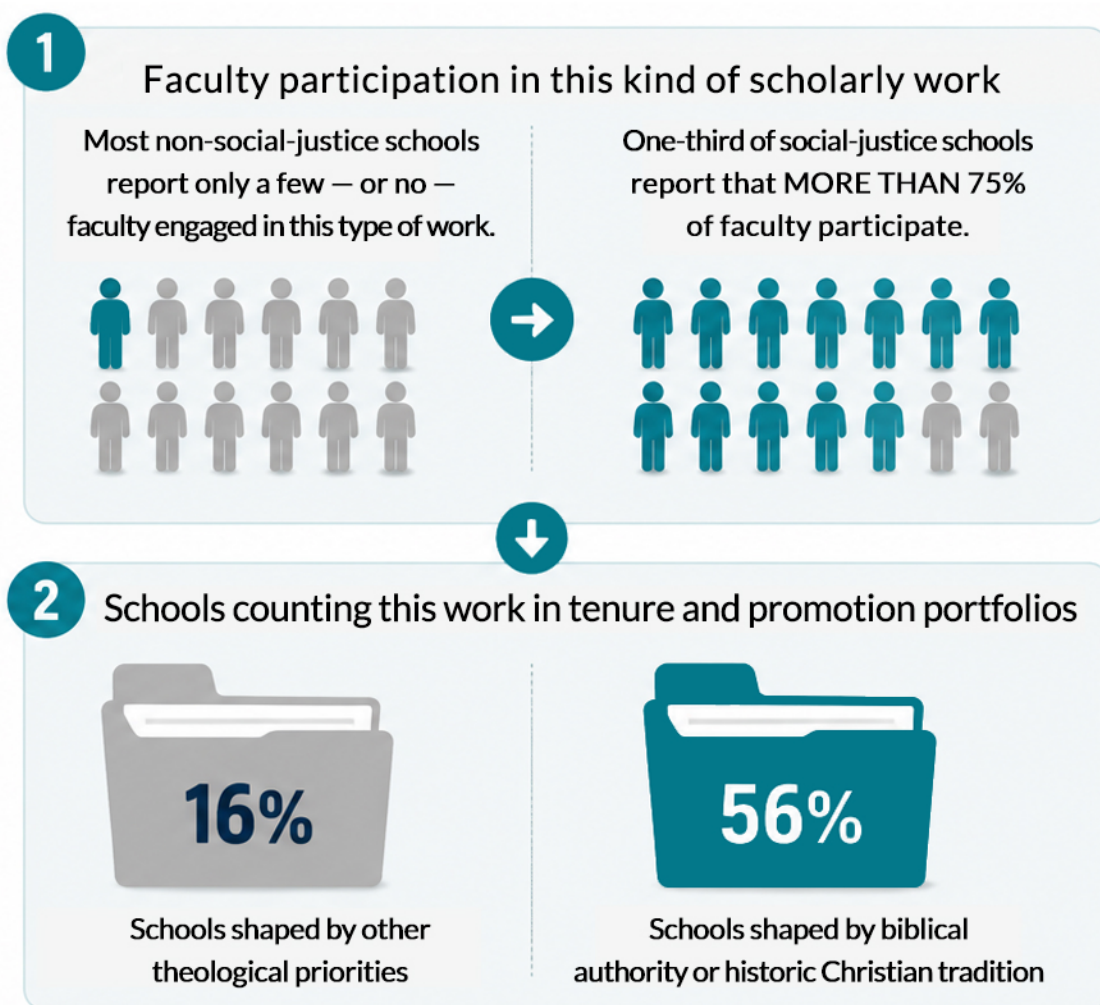
Disaggregation of these overall findings shows differences by school type. As seen in the second finding above, the social justice signal is the strongest in this finding. Among the 33 schools that named social justice as shaping their approach to student formation, faculty research participation skews high, with 10 schools reporting "more than 75 percent" of their faculty are engaged in research that addresses changing demographics. In contrast, among the 52 schools that did not name social justice, participation collapses toward the low end, with most saying "only a few" or "none" are engaged.

Institutional recognition for this kind of scholarly work differs significantly by school type—evidenced by a 40-percentage point difference. More than half (56 percent) of social-justice schools give tenure/promotion credit; only 16 percent of non-social-justice schools do. Other school characteristics matter as well. Faculty research on changing demographics is also strongly tied to another approach to student formation. Faculty at schools whose approach to formation and leadership preparation is shaped by engagement with broader society are more likely to be involved in research in this area. Interestingly, tenure and promotion credit for this work relates significantly, though not as strongly, to two other approaches to student formation. Schools whose approach to formation are shaped by biblical authority and interpretation or by faithfulness to historic Christian tradition are more likely to count this kind of scholarly work in tenure and promotion portfolios.

Future phases of the study are underway, including key informant interviews, ethnographic visits, deep analysis of institutional data, and an interpretive gathering where schools will help researchers pull meaning from the data. More analysis will be carried out and will be published with any updates at the conclusion of the study.

For now, we offer a few takeaways and recommendations for increasing institutional capacity:

1. **Viability and Vitality:** Consider structural adaptations, if you have not already—e.g., incorporate measurable goals related to addressing changing demographics in your strategic plans, or have task forces for this work report directly to senior administration.
2. **Climate and Intergroup Experience:** (1) Examine the school's theological commitments and tie those explicitly to how you intend to adapt to your changing



student demographic, particularly faculty's empowerment to engage this work. (2) Consider the experiences of the various constituent groups—collect data from them directly, anonymously, and often about their experiences.

3. **Access and Success:** Keep in mind that both getting students to the school and keeping them are related to financial realities, including life realities.

4. **Education and Scholarship:** Explore faculty incentives. How are these related to the school's theological assumptions? Scholarship follows incentive; incentive also appears to follow theology.

We were pleased to see that, even before analysis of data, deans were finding the survey itself to be a helpful tool to increase their schools' capacity for this work. We were contacted by several deans who experienced the questions to be useful, as represented by one unsolicited comment from a dean participant: "...quite probative for curricular development, program design, and futures related to this important work, as well as general assessment of institutional commitments."

Increasing institutional capacity to adapt to the change that students bring is multilayered with a wide range of possibilities, beyond the tactic of broadening the range of backgrounds and experiences represented among faculty and administrators or the tactic of expanding scholars included in course syllabi—there are many more possible strategies. The study hopes to illuminate the range of strategies used by schools and expand the imagination of schools and their leaders for adaptive change in this work, for the benefit of their students, the communities from which they come, and ultimately the religious world and the broader public.

¹ATS collects enrollment data on the race/ethnicity, gender, denomination, and age of students and its reporting is limited to these demographic categories.

²See Daryl G. Smith's framework for diversity (e.g., *Diversity's Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work*, Johns Hopkins University Press) for an in-depth explanation of the frames highlighted in this article.

³ Note that, because of positive skewing in the GSQ and Regular Faculty survey—a common occurrence in ATS survey responses—focus was placed on the positive response options for analysis.

⁴Only one Indigenous faculty member responded to the faculty survey and, thus, omitted from analysis.

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