

Collaboration brings surprise findings from Annual Report Form Revision informants

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

The information-gathering phase of the Comprehensive Revision of the Association's Annual Report Form (ARF) winds down this summer with the completion of a first round of focus groups and two research projects. Focus group conversations and interview data (from both ATS schools and other accrediting agencies) enlightened the ARF Revision in unexpected and helpful ways.

Focus group findings

Two findings were the most surprising. First, while one of the goals of the ARF Comprehensive Revision has been to simplify the forms and process so as to ease data submission, the word “expand” emerged more than a couple times among focus group notes. There was a sense throughout the input that the ARF process has not been as demanding as once assumed; this may reflect helpful smaller-scale changes made to the ARF in recent years. “Simplify” was still the key, but “amplify some” was also heard clearly, particularly in places that would help the schools, such as for purposes of better understanding structures and responsibilities or for more targeted recruitment and retention. How and which expansions will be made, while simplifying the ARF, will be guided by a “lowest common multiple” approach that seeks to collect the most useful data for the largest portion of ATS schools.

The second surprise surfaced in the process of comparing notes across roles. Similar requests of a certain type



were made by representatives of seemingly unrelated institutional departments. For example, a request to add data collection of tuition for MA degrees (per credit) was made by both the CEO/CAO focus groups and the Student Services/Registrar focus groups. Likewise, the CFO/Development focus groups and the Student Services/Registrar focus groups affirmed the importance of collecting student debt data at the institutional level.

The challenge of reporting FTE was further noted by the CEO/CAO and Student Services/Registrar groups, as was the difficulty that embedded schools encounter when reporting finance data (underscored by the CEO/CAO and CFO/Development groups). This was a refreshing finding—an encouraging indication that similar conversations are occurring across departments within the schools.

Not surprising was the finding that all groups desire additional data collection related to online learning. While recognizing that the emergence of hybrid/hyflex modalities and all their varieties makes such data collection difficult, all groups expressed their enthusiasm for the opportunity to compare with other schools and to analyze changes over time—regarding the programs

and modalities offered and the spending per student for various systems (e.g., SIS, LMS).

Focus groups based on institutional roles—CEOs/CAOs, CFOs/senior development officers, chief information officers, senior student services administrators/registrars, and library directors—met throughout the spring semester to provide their input on what is working and not working well with the current ARF, particularly as related to the ARF sections they typically handle. In general, group participants affirmed the ARF process, including attending reports disseminated by ATS (e.g., *Strategic Information Report*, *Institutional Peer Profile Report*), stating the data are helpful for internal comparisons over time and for peer comparisons. For some schools, the ARF is the only way the school collects data. School representatives in focus groups also stressed the value of the ARF process as an opportunity to appreciate the different roles at an institution collaborating to submit data.

Positive experiences of data collection at schools ranged from “a very easy process” to “not viewed as an undue burden,” particularly as participants highlighted several helpful concrete aspects of the ARF—from the online format for data submission to the ATS “Help Desk” to forms that parallel existing data collection mechanisms (e.g., the ARF’s finance forms and current accounting processes).

Schools named the self-study and reaccreditation as important purposes for collecting and using ARF data. Several mentioned how they leverage peer comparison data in important decisions within their own institutions—budget allocation or contract negotiations—with outside vendors, emphasizing that “coming from ATS provides some credence to the data.” New member institutions find that ARF data help them orient to trends and priorities for the industry.

Requests for change were abundant. They ranged widely and tended toward the specific role of the requester—Can the timing of the ARF be changed to when submit- ters are less busy? What level of detail is really needed? Timing, of course, is tricky, given the many departments

collecting data and their respective peak work seasons, as are definitions of what is necessary detail. Participants also offered many great suggestions to **add** to data collection—though prudence would dictate first collect- ing new types of data in survey form (e.g., more salary data for more positions; ministerial placements; services offered related to student life, such as tutoring, housing, childcare, etc.) before adding to the formalized ARF process—and suggestions for tools that perhaps have already been created, such as an “interactive dashboard to manipulate the data.” (see the [ATS Data Visualization tool](#)).

A second round of focus groups will meet through the fall semester, providing feedback on drafts of the various ARF forms that will be created next month.

Findings from second research project

In fall 2021, interviews were conducted of key infor- mants at 60 ATS schools to determine how schools collect and use data (see [report](#) by Meryl Herr). This past spring, a shorter research project followed that involved interviews of representatives from 12 accrediting agen- cies—six US “regional,” two Canadian provincial, and four discipline-specific agencies. The project was guided by three research questions:

- How do other accrediting agencies collect data and what do they collect from schools?
- How are these organizations responding to the changing needs of schools in terms of data collection and dissemination?
- What are ways ATS could better align data processes with those of our schools?

The first of its kind for ATS, the project provided an important look into the world of higher education, beyond theological education, specifically through the lenses of accrediting organizations. First, similar to ATS, other accrediting agencies primarily collect enrollment, finance, and student success data. Second, the accredit- ing agencies focus on aligning as much as possible to

reporting requirements for [IPEDS](#) or [Stats Canada](#) to ease their member institutions' data collection and reporting processes. Discipline-specific agencies go a step further, additionally asking for outcomes-related data (e.g., learning outcomes, placement, alum satisfaction). While not all through the ARF process, ATS does ask schools and their constituencies for these data via other means (e.g., [ATS Student Questionnaires](#), [Alum-Workforce Survey](#)).

In terms of addressing changing needs in schools, informants named recent efforts in digitizing the reporting process to enable more efficient data collection and data maintenance. Shifting from paper or email submission to online formats has provided the opportunity for both longitudinal tracking and continuity through school leadership transitions. Data visualization and reporting published by ATS were explicitly mentioned as exemplars—ATS has been collecting data online for 15 years and is ahead of the field in terms of data collection, access, and use.

Interestingly, accrediting agencies in the project named data collection as *part of* the accreditation process. This connection is less clear for ATS, given that schools report data annually and separate from their self-study reports or any visits by accrediting teams. An important consideration suggested in the report is better alignment between the ARF and accreditation processes. Such alignment may

strengthen the use and purpose of data collection for ATS and make the data collection process more meaningful for member institutions and their programs. A [full report](#) by primary investigator Joshua Canada is available for review.

This ARF Comprehensive Revision has received input from a variety of sources thus far, including the ARF/ Database Comprehensive Revision Advisory Committee, the ATS Boards, the ATS Research Advisory Committee, interviewees at 60 ATS schools, focus group participants at 40 ATS schools, informants at 12 accrediting agencies in the US and in Canada, and ATS staff. The project is on track to transition to the final *Implementation* phase, completing initial drafts in time for a second round of focus groups this fall, with a public draft available at the beginning of next calendar year. It has been, and will continue to be, a *collaborative* project with multiple partners and a *connected* project with attention to how changes in one form affect other forms and to the overall purposes of data collection—all working toward the goal of making the ARF more relevant for schools and for the membership.

If you have been invited to participate in a focus group, we encourage you to respond right away. We also [welcome input](#) on the ARF comprehensive revision any time.



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