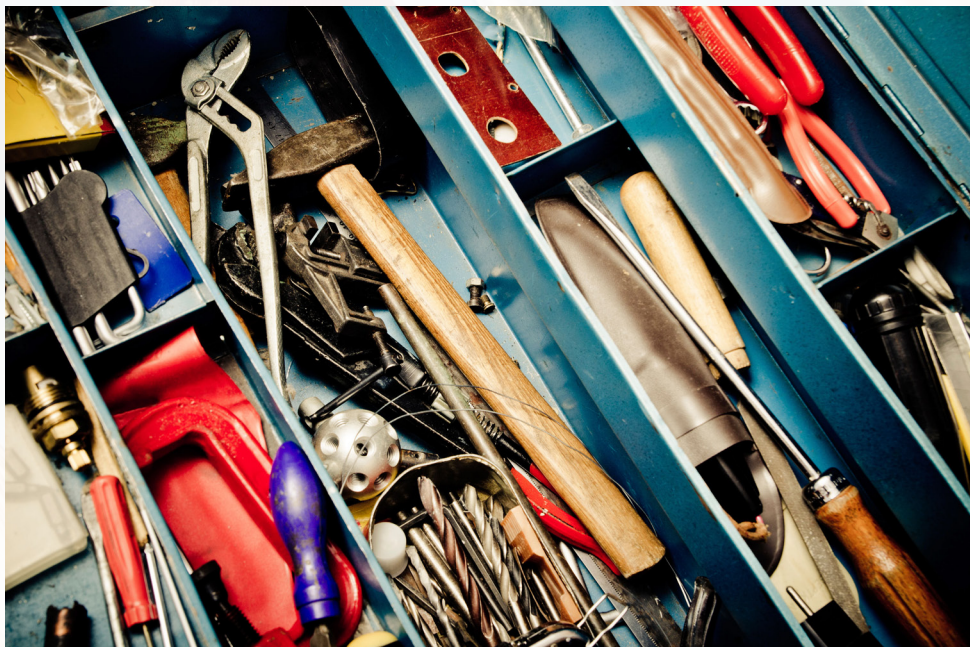# Why the Strategic Information Report is an essential tool in every school's toolbox

By Chris Meinzer

By now every CEO of an ATS member school has received the 2015 Strategic Information Report (SIR), designed to provide a variety of strategic indicators to help assess the school's overall financial strength and performance in a range of areas. The SIR can also be used as a tool in your school's strategic planning process by providing 10 years of institutional data along with benchmark comparatives to other theological schools.

To make the most of this tool, every administrator and board member should ask three simple questions (on page 2).

THE NEW SIR

The SIR has been completely revised from its prior format. Here are just a few of the significant updates:

1. The SIR is built in a **modular format**.

    a. Each of the seven chapters is designed for a particular audience. Chapter 1 is an institutional overview that can be used with your board. Chapters 2 through 4 can be used with student services and academics to provide data on student admissions, enrollment, and completions. Chapter 5 concentrates on finances, Chapter 6 reflects on development practices, and Chapter 7 offers faculty information.

    b. Each page—which provides your school's data, definitions for the data, and, in some cases, where your school fits as a benchmark to other ATS member schools—is also intended to be modular so that you can take the page to a desired audience for further conversation.

2. The SIR uses **relevant ratios and benchmarks**.

    a. Where appropriate, the SIR turns your school's data into ratios relevant for nonprofit entities and compares the ratios against similar theological schools and industry standards.

    b. Benchmarks, such as expenditures per full-time-equivalent student and enrollment indexed to the school's ecclesial family, provide opportunity for you to see how your institution compares to peer theological schools.

    c. Chapter 1 includes an "executive dashboard" with green, yellow, and red to identify items that might require further investigation.

3. The SIR is designed to **encourage further investigation**.

    a. Many pages of the SIR provide narrative explaining issues to consider as you review the figures. The data snapshot gives an indication of the

direction of your institution, but the conversations as to why the trend is occurring will likely offer the most insight.

b. The SIR includes 10 years of data that can be used in the accreditation process and in strategic planning. Your institution's analysis of the data and consideration of the many factors contributing to the historic changes will make the SIR an extremely valuable tool.

THREE QUESTIONS EVERY ADMINISTRATOR AND BOARD MEMBER SHOULD ASK

With the many unique reports within the SIR, each institution will focus on different aspects depending on their strategic interest on enrollment, finance, or other relevant area. No matter which area of focus is selected, there are three questions that an administrator or board member can ask to further an honest institutional investigation.

1 What are the trend lines in the data, and are they positive or negative?

Direction matters. The SIR provides 10 years of historical data for the institution within each figure, and this data develops a trend line that will show either improvement or decline. With this trend line of data and a comparative benchmark provided, an institution can determine if it is moving in a positive or a negative direction.

2 What are the main institutional factors that have contributed to this positive/negative trend line?

Context matters. An apparent negative trend in the short term may be the result of institutional decision making to facilitate adjustments in mission or resources; however, a negative trend over a longer period of time is often not sustainable or even wise. This second-level question seeks not only to provide discernment in identifying the main factors contributing to the trend but also to provide some measurement of the institution's ability and intentionality in its influence on the direction.

3 What are one or two institutional activities that will further the positive or reverse the negative?

Response matters. The SIR was developed recognizing that there can be myriad variables that influence strategic data points. The figures and chapters of the SIR can be used to encourage discussion within the institution about these variables. In the end, it is these community discussions that will lead to the greatest benefit of the SIR as leaders review the trend directions, consider institutional contributing factors, and, most importantly, set out a course for leveraging trends and factors toward a positive future.

MORE TOOLS FOR THE TOOLBOX

The Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR) compares a seminary's data with similar information from five to 15 peer institutions—either similar institutions or schools whose general profiles align with long-term aspirations the school has for itself. The report includes more than 20 tables of data that show compiled averages, highs, medians, and lows but do not divulge confidential information regarding the ATS member institutions. The tables focus on enrollment, faculty, and financial data. ATS member institutions are offered one IPPR each year free of charge. Additional IPPRs may be requested at a cost of $100 per profile.

Another useful companion to the SIR is "The Big Picture: Strategic Choices for Theological Schools" by Anthony T. Ruger and Barbara G. Wheeler, available online at http://bit.ly/AuburnBigPicture.

If you would be interested in further discussion of the ATS Strategic Information Report and its use at your institution, we invite you to join us for a webinar on May 28 at 2 p.m. (eastern time). Registration information will be sent in early May. Also, if you are interested in a more specific discussion of your institution's SIR, please contact Chris Meinzer at meinzer@ats.edu.

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