

Five things we've learned about assessing personal and spiritual formation

BY JO ANN DEASY

One of the major themes emerging in the Educational Models and Practices project has been “formation,” but what does formation mean in ATS schools, and how do we assess whether it is occurring?

In spring 2018, ATS conducted a survey of formation personnel in member schools. The survey focused on how schools understood the terms “personal and spiritual formation” in the ATS Standards of Accreditations (A.2.4, B.2.4). Schools were asked for their definitions of formation, learning goals related to formation, and the various ways formation was assessed in their institutions. More than 130 schools responded from a representative sample of ATS schools. Here are five things we've learned so far.

1. Only 59% of schools have a formal definition of personal and spiritual formation.

Formation is, of course, a complex term whose definitions can range from a broad understanding that embraces the whole of theological education to a more narrow focus on spiritual formation with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines or vocational discernment. Definitions of formation in theological schools also differ greatly by the ecclesial commitments of schools, ranging from denominationally affiliated to interreligious, from evangelical to Roman Catholic, from ministry focused to academically focused, and combinations of all of the



above. It is not surprising, then, that only 59% of the participating schools had a formal definition of formation. Those without a formal definition were fairly evenly distributed across ecclesial family, enrollment, country, and institutional structure (freestanding vs. embedded), with the exception of Roman Catholic schools—many of whom cited the *Program of Priestly Formation* (18 of the 32 Roman Catholic schools) and/or *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* for their formal definitions. Several schools noted that they themselves were currently rethinking their definitions of formation and seeking clarity on their expectations for student learning outcomes.

2. Assessment of personal and spiritual formation most often takes place in required courses and field education.

While only 59% of the schools had a formal definition for formation, 96% had formal learning goals related to “personal and spiritual formation” for their MDiv and MA Professional degrees. Schools were asked where in the curriculum these learning goals were assessed.

The results are below:

Required course(s)	110
Field education/contextual education	110
Other (please specify)	76
Clinical pastoral education	45
We do not formally assess formation in the curriculum for the MDiv and MA Specialized Ministry degrees.	2

Most of the schools (96) stated that formal assessment occurred in both required courses and field education/contextual education. Those schools who cited assessment of formation in “other” settings most often cited some form of candidacy, mid-term, or final-year assessment (23 out of 76 schools) or the use of portfolios (8 out of 76), and these assessments were most often in addition to other sites of assessment listed above.

3. Assessment of personal and spiritual formation is most often done by academic deans, formation faculty, or the faculty as a whole.

We asked schools who was involved in assessing formation at their institutions. More than half of the schools cited academic deans (65%), faculty person(s) dedicated to formation (62%), or all faculty (54%). Who were most likely to include academic deans? Small schools (81%) and evangelical schools (71%). Who were more likely to include formation faculty? The largest schools (66%) and Roman Catholic schools (78%). Almost two-thirds of the schools included the students themselves in the assessment process. Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools (90%) were most likely to include students. In addition to those within the institution, more than 70% of the schools involved people outside of the institution in the assessment process. A majority of those listed were field education supervisors (82%).

While many faculty are involved in assessing personal and spiritual formation, they often do not feel prepared for such work. A 2016 ATS study of faculty indicated that faculty recognized the importance of student formation but did not feel adequately prepared for this work in their

doctoral programs or the institutions where they were serving.¹

4. Most ATS schools feel that they have adequate resources to assess personal and spiritual formation.

One of the main purposes of the survey was to better understand what types of resources might be needed in the schools to assess the personal and spiritual formation of students. Most schools (74%) feel that they have adequate resources to assess formation, with Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools feeling the most well-resourced (87%) and mainline schools feeling the least (66%).

5. A majority of ATS schools use some type of tool in assessing personal and spiritual formation . . . and, most often, it is a tool they have created “in-house.”

A majority of schools (90%) used some type of tool in their assessment processes. Of the 120 schools who use assessment tools, 87 (73%) had created their own in-house tools. For almost half of the schools (40 out of 87), their in-house tool was the only standardized tool they used in assessment.

Many schools create in-house tools because personal and spiritual formation are so tied to the unique mission and ecclesial commitments of a given school. There might be some value, though, in bringing schools together to share effective strategies for creating in-house assessments, including the various questions and approaches that schools have found most useful in helping to facilitate personal and spiritual growth among their students.

We attempted in the survey to determine if there were any tools that were used commonly among ATS schools. A few tools rose to the top:

- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (46 schools)
- Spiritual Gifts Assessments (24 schools)
- Enneagram (19 schools)
- StrengthsFinder (19 schools)

¹ Deborah H. C. Gin and Stacy Williams-Duncan, “Faculty Perceptions about their work: Four Snapshots of faculty in ATS schools,” *Colloquy Online*, January 2016).

The MBTI was used by schools in all ecclesial families and in the United States and Canada. Mainline schools were more likely to use the Enneagram, and evangelical schools were more likely to use spiritual gifts assessments or StrengthsFinder. Canadian schools were more likely to use the ATS Profiles of Ministry Program or the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.

Yet no one instrument was used among a majority of the schools. Those that were cited frequently, such as spiritual gifts assessments and the MBTI, varied in their validities and/or may not be well-researched. Collectively, the schools identified 28 different tools used to assess personal and spiritual formation.

Many of the instruments cited by the schools focus on a particular aspect of formation, but very few integrate personal, spiritual, theological, and vocational in ways that are necessary for theological education. Individual schools are the ones doing this important integrative work with students. Perhaps this work could be strengthened even further and expanded to serve communities of faith and the wider public if schools worked together to create integrative tools that could be made available outside of their institutions.



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