Project explores data relationships at ATS schools—an update on Annual Report Form revision

By Deborah H. C. Gin

How does your school relate to data? Is it data-free, data-curious, data-informed, or data-driven? This four-fold typology[1] of data interest formed the framework for analyzing interviews of key informants in a recent study of data collection and use at ATS schools.

- **Data-free** *institutions demonstrate ignorance of or apathy toward data.*
  "A lot of what ATS is asking for, it doesn't really matter to us . . . we have not used it."

- **Data-curious** *institutions want to use data in decision-making but are not sure how.*
  "I think it's important that we collect this data. I think the next step is using the data for an advantage. That's where the gap is and hopefully, we can fix that."

- **Data-informed** *institutions make decisions using data in addition to other considerations or motivations.*

- **Data-driven** *institutions rely most heavily on data for decision-making.*
  "Whether it's assessing everything from academic programs to enrollment things to almost every aspect of what we do as an organization . . . It's a way we've not only communicated externally but also internally to all of our stakeholders. I would guess not a day goes by that we're not collecting some sort of a datapoint."

The research team led by Meryl Herr found that ATS schools spanned all four types in their relationships to data. As indicated by the select excerpts, there is a wide range of schools, in terms of their interest and use of both ATS data and internal school data. Evaluation of the school's type also likely depends on who is asked. In the video below, Itihari Toure, associate dean for curriculum and assessment at McCormick Theological Seminary and Annual Report Form (ARF) Revision Advisory Committee member, suggests an additional type (or perhaps a version of one of these four) in which organizations tend to share data selectively to certain stakeholders. Perhaps you see your school among these types.

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1   O'Leary and Hunt (2016). *Workplace research: Conducting small-scale research in organizations.* SAGE.

The study's findings also provided the ARF Revision Advisory Committee with a deeper understanding of why and how ATS schools connect with data (see the project's introductory article for more information on the committee). They further discussed how the type of school might be related to institutional health or to other organizational benchmarks, and they suggested potential follow-up studies based on this question. Rene Espinosa, vice president for administration and finance at Oblate School of Theology and ATS Board of Commissioners member, also sits on this project's advisory committee. In the video below, he describes the journey with data that his school has taken in recent years.

Use of data and interpretations of data continues to rank high among ATS school decision-makers. Though this study found a qualitative range of interest, other surveys have shown that a majority of ATS schools welcome data and research findings to help in their planning and decision-making and are willing to provide access to their own data to make comparison data available.

In 2018, the ATS Board of Commissioners developed a new data-sharing policy that would significantly change who had access to ATS data. At that time, a poll of ATS presidents and deans showed that 75% were moderately or completely comfortable with providing greater access to the institutional data they submit annually, another 12% were somewhat comfortable, and only 4% were not at all comfortable (see "ATS Board of Commissioners approves new data sharing policy"). This was far higher than what ATS staff expected, signaling a new era had arrived with respect to data sharing, access, and use. Findings from an ATS Organizational Models Survey last

year indicated that ATS data (80% of presidents), data collected and analyzed by schools (73% of presidents) and data on trends in higher education (72% of presidents) were the top three sources of information used in making major decisions for the school.

Additional findings from the study of data collection and use at ATS schools showed that schools appreciated changes already incorporated in the ARF process and forms, such as streamlining certain parts (e.g., display logic that turns "off" portions that are irrelevant to a particular school) and other efficiencies. At the same time, the research team identified lingering trouble spots (e.g., related to structure, country, ecclesial family of the schools)—some aspects that will be attended to in the revised set of ARF forms and others that will be difficult to incorporate, given the broad range of schools within the membership (see Data Collection and Use at ATS Schools for complete study findings).

Perhaps the most important recommendation of the report was to "cultivate a healthy ecosystem of data collection and use." Such an ecosystem recognizes that better data collection and reporting will assist not only individual schools but also their peer schools that rely heavily on reports or data visualization of peers.

"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 Herr. "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."

This recommendation underscores the importance of making it easier for schools to regularly provide accurate data and for schools to periodically interrogate the data submitted, as reflected in Espinosa's statement: "Data, if tracked and used accurately, can keep you from going in the wrong direction if it's being assessed and reviewed."

In addition, the recommendation suggests that when schools do not provide complete data, the school and its various constituencies are not represented completely. ATS boards, staff, and consultants rely heavily on the data that schools submit each year in a variety of ways, from research studies to committee selection and from industry reports to event participation. "Good data in, good data out" provides the potential for good decisions to be made—for schools as well as for the Association.

As this ARF Comprehensive Revision continues, consider a reset to the data your school provides—take a careful look at your data this upcoming year to make sure it is accurate and complete. Also, consider how your school relates to data in terms of the typology offered at the beginning of the article—is there room for your school to develop in its data collection and use?

The ATS membership and the entire industry will benefit as we collectively learn to improve how we handle data. We welcome input on the ARF Comprehensive Revision any time—please email us at arfmail@ats.edu

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