

What Graduating Student Questionnaire data can contribute to formation assessment



By Christopher M. The

Graduation surveys usually help schools look back. A peer-reviewed study of the **ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ)** suggests that familiar questions may also offer useful building blocks for thinking about formation assessment, while a later cohort provides a useful check that the same broad patterns appear again.

Your school may already review graduates' answers about prayer, vocational clarity, social justice, and working across difference. The more difficult question is how those answers relate to one another—and whether they can inform assessment while there is still time to respond. This article

does not propose a universal measure of formation. It asks what schools might learn from research showing that existing GSQ responses can be read together, and what possibilities that creates for local assessment.



A peer-reviewed study recently published in the *Review of Religious Research* provides the empirical starting point. A follow-up analysis of the class of 2026 then asks whether the broad patterns appear again in the most-recent graduating cohort. Together, the two analyses set up the practical question at the center of this article: what could schools do with formation-related evidence already embedded in the GSQ?

More than one dimension of formation

The study authors examined responses from 5,528 graduates at 151 North American theological schools in 2023–24. They analyzed 36 GSQ items about perceived personal growth and skill development, alongside 16 items about educational experience and well-being (see **Data and Methods**). Rather than treating formation as one undifferentiated outcome, the study asked how religious/spiritual formation, engagement across difference, and other dimensions relate to one another and to students' well-being.

The formation questions supported five more specific dimensions alongside a general dimension: *social justice commitment, religiousness/spirituality, intercultural competence, self-identity, and interdisciplinary integration*. Self-identity included vocational clarity, self-confidence, and self-knowledge; interdisciplinary integration included science, ecological concerns, and Christian philosophy. These measures reflect students' perceptions of their education, not direct observations of spiritual maturity.

Two types of findings matter here: *formational dimensions* and *response profiles*. Whereas the dimensions describe what was measured, researchers also identified five broader response profiles—recurring combinations across those dimensions—labeled *Languishing, Faltering, Struggling, Managing, and Thriving*. These labels are shorthand for statistical patterns, not fixed types of students.

The middle profiles show why this distinction matters. The group labeled *Faltering* reported relatively stronger religious/spiritual formation but weaker social justice commitment and intercultural competence, while *Struggling* showed nearly the reverse. Although the two groups reported similar overall well-being, the pattern underneath differed: *Faltering* reported stronger religious/spiritual well-being, while *Struggling* reported stronger social well-being (see [Table 1](#)).

The practical point is not the labels themselves. It is that a single, overall formation score can conceal meaningfully different combinations of strengths and difficulties. The study also cautions against treating these profiles as fixed types of theological students (see [Discussion](#)). That raises a straightforward question: would the broad structure appear again in a later graduating cohort?

A later cohort checks the pattern

The latest (2025–26) [GSQ Total School Profile report](#) describes the class of 2026: 5,689 graduates across 141 participating schools. For the follow-up analysis prepared for this article, the newer responses were analyzed afresh rather than assigned to the earlier profiles. A comparable five-profile solution emerged again, with much the same combinations of relative strengths and weaknesses.

The original study provides the peer-reviewed evidence, while the more recent analysis provides a later-cohort check: the same broad structure appears again. Figure 1 below shows that estimated profile shares are close across cohorts for most groups, while Figure 2 at the end shows that the relative pattern across the five formation dimensions remains highly recognizable. The practical value is continuity, not a claim that formation improved across theological education.

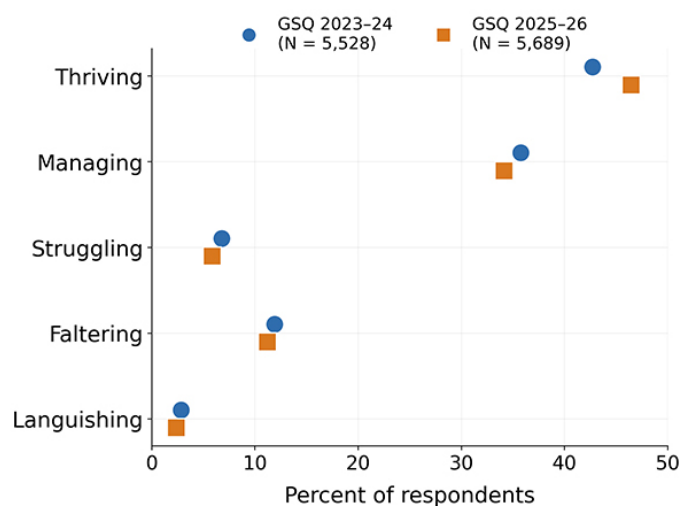


Figure 1. Estimated profile shares in two graduating cohorts

Each row compares the estimated share associated with one response profile. Blue circles indicate the 2023–24 cohort; orange squares indicate the 2025–26 cohort. Closer points indicate more similar shares across cohorts. The cohorts contain different respondents, so differences do not represent individual change over time.

Putting GSQ findings to work

Each ATS member school owns its assessment strategy and the responsibility to demonstrate “quality assurance for various publics” (from Preamble to the [Standards of Accreditation](#)). It is important to choose evaluative methods that align with your school’s purpose, theology, and capacities. Among the [many approaches ATS schools take](#), the GSQ offers another resource to support evaluation, not as a replacement for institutional judgment, but as a complement to an assessment strategy that is yours. That said, here are some suggestions to consider.

1. Start where you are—the community you comprise, the data you collect. Colleagues involved in assessment might gather periodically to examine related concerns together. This collective effort extends to the kinds of questions you—and other ATS member schools—are asking. For the data you have, are you looking across the responses you collect? Regarding interpersonal competencies, for example, the GSQ asks graduates about a range of items, including empathy for those experiencing poverty or oppression, insight into others' troubles, and social justice concern.

Two things are true at once: looking across related items may be more informative than treating each answer in isolation, while certain questionnaire items may be most useful for their singular purpose. Another approach for smaller programs is to review several, comparable graduating cohorts together while keeping response counts visible, as this may offer a steadier picture than any single-year cohort. These options assume your data collection and analysis practices are consistent enough to allow you to pool data across cohorts and to incorporate other resources.

2. Connect the measures to your school's purposes. Which dimensions of student learning and formation offer useful evidence for your institution's formation outcomes, and which leave gaps? Suppose students consistently report difficulty integrating their learning across disciplines. Faculty could examine that pattern alongside planning more integrative assignments, while field education colleagues gather more robust feedback. If the additional inputs suggest similar difficulties, then a school might reconsider how coursework and supervised practice connect, when to make an adjustment, and why revisiting the evidence is meaningful.

To be certain, surveys like the GSQ have limitations, and a school relying on them alone may wish to reconsider its evaluative strategy. Arguably, the best use of survey data is to start an inquiry: *What can we measure this way? What might explain what we are seeing? Are there other ways of knowing?* The answer to that last question is yes, and the study's authors call for qualitative evidence to deepen interpretation (see RRR, **Practical Implications**). The meaning drawn from these assessments across disciplines connects tools to purpose and mission to identity.

3. Consider local adaptations at certain checkpoints. The study's authors also suggest considering these items at midpoints **between matriculation and completion**. To do so, a school might identify a relevant group of questions and explore whether asking (a version of) them at a program milestone would shed light on their educational experiences while there is still time to respond.

Before incorporating or adapting GSQ items locally or at midpoints, consider discussing appropriate use with **ATS Student Data Services**. Questions designed to look back over a program at completion may need attention to wording and timing when asked earlier. A pilot could test students' understanding and compare responses with reflections, portfolios, or supervisory feedback. Suffice it to say, repeating questions to the same student does not, by itself, establish a valid measure of developmental change.

4. Ownership does not need to mean working alone. Your colleagues at other institutions may help you compare approaches, interpret an unexpected pattern, or collaborate on a manageable pilot. ATS offers support for developing member-driven relationships. In particular, the **ATS Formation Repository** gathers research, tools, and institutional examples; the **ATS Assessment Coordinators resource page** includes formation-assessment case studies and a practical evaluation guide; and the **ATS Resource Library page** on grant initiative-related assessment ties multilevel evaluation to programmatic impact. These ATS-curated options sit alongside many other resources.

Which formation outcome could your school better understand with evidence already in hand—and what educational decision could that understanding inform? Continue the conversation with colleagues on [Engage ATS](#), or contact ATS Student Data Services at Qmail@ats.edu.

Editor’s Note: The full research article by Peter J. Jankowski, Steven J. Sandage, David C. Wang, Christopher The, and Deborah H. C. Gin—available now as an open access OnlineFirst article via DOI: [10.1177/0034673X261477782](https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X261477782)—will appear in a future printed issue of the *Review of Religious Research* journal. The follow-up analysis underlying Figures 1 and 2 is a separate exploration; it does not repeat every analysis from the original study and has not undergone independent peer review.

Supplemental illustration



Figure 2. Formation scores within comparable response profiles

Read each row across the two cohorts to compare its pattern of scores.

Rows are ordered from higher- to lower-scoring profiles for orientation.

Colors and numbers represent estimated average scores on a 1-5 scale (see *GSQ-E sample* for scale anchors). The horizontal-axis abbreviations are SJC, social justice commitment; R/S, religiousness/spirituality; ICC, intercultural competence; Self, self-identity; and INT, interdisciplinary integration.



Christopher M. The

Christopher M. The is director of student data and research at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.