



### Why data matters in a membership organization

*"If we have data, let's look at data. If all we have are our opinions, let's go with mine."*

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The title quote from Jim Barksdale (former CEO of Netscape, predecessor to Mozilla) reminds me of the value of data—especially in a membership organization as diverse as ours. ATS has 273 member schools scattered all across North America with nearly 3,500 theological faculty members and more than 3,000 full-time administrators. That's a lot of opinions! All good opinions, I'm sure. I value opinions; they can be catalysts for wonderful conversations. However, I value *data-informed* opinions even more because they can lead to conversations that truly make a difference in the lives of our schools and our students. And they sometimes challenge what we have "always known." Let me cite two examples for ATS schools.

**Example #1:** Student debt is a key concern for our membership, and there are many opinions on how to address it. Many believe the cause is ever-escalating tuition costs, but the data for ATS schools suggest somewhat surprisingly that there is no direct correlation between the amount schools charge for tuition and the amount students borrow. Data analysis from two of my ATS colleagues indicates that excessive student debt for ATS graduates—many of whom are adults with dependents—is due more to borrowing for living expenses than to borrowing for tuition (see [The Two Biggest Myths about Educational Debt](#) by Jo Ann Deasy and Chris Meinzer). To be sure, those data are based on students' self-reporting on the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire, but hard data from the US Department of Education also supports that alternative perspective. In reviewing total student loan volume for freestanding ATS member schools, my colleague Chris Meinzer and I found that almost half had total loans that actually exceeded their total *net* tuition. Some of those schools had loan totals exceeding their net tuition totals by 500% to 600%! Clearly, lowering tuition rates would not significantly address those debt load concerns. Conversations about student debt no doubt generate many interesting opinions, but my point

is that research points us to more fruitful, data-driven discussions that may challenge even our most closely-held opinions.

**Example #2:** Emerging educational models are another source of myriad opinions among ATS members. And the opinions run the gamut from “You can’t do formation online” to “Traditional residential education is dying.” Emerging data suggest the truth is found in neither extreme. The membership-wide Educational Models and Practices Project is beginning to inform our conversations with data-driven stories and statistics about the educational effectiveness of our schools’ many models. For example, “everyone knows” that you can’t do spiritual formation online. Yet, conversations among ATS member schools who “are doing formation online” indicate very encouraging results (see [Accessible, Effective: How online theological education is shifting the formation model](#) by Eliza Smith Brown). And data from the most recent ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire shows that those who completed most of their studies online report higher satisfaction with their own spiritual growth than those who completed most or all of their studies on-campus (4.20 vs. 3.75; 5 = highest). To be sure, we are still in the process of collecting and analyzing these data regarding the effectiveness of various educational models. Yet, the data are pointing us in directions that may surprise many of us, despite our opinions to the contrary.

I’m not arguing that data should be our master, though I do like the motto “In God we trust; all others bring data.” Data should not robotically drive our decisions, but they should inform our decisions. Data always need interpreting, and interpretation requires wisdom that goes beyond just stats and stories. We are a membership organization whose many opinions truly matter, but they matter more and we are all better served when we share our *informed* opinions. As we approach our second century and all the changes that will bring—from a new executive director to new accrediting standards—it may be worth remembering this: rather than just going with our individual opinions, let’s look at the data so we will all have more informed opinions.