

Bookends: The value of POMs from start to finish

By Danny M. West

Since the mid-90s, the Profiles of Ministry (POM) instrument has served a central and functional purpose in our school. The instrument is linked to the spiritual formation curriculum of our institution and is folded into the introductory spiritual formation course that assists students in understanding and processing their individual calls to ministry.

The placement of the POM in our spiritual formation core is fundamental to our understanding of the value of the instrument in assisting students as they wrestle with the spiritual, vocational, and personal implications of ministry. Hence, the POM serves as an invaluable, indeed indispensable, resource for entering students. Currently our school implements only Stage 1 into our core, but this rich instrument has served us and our students in innumerable ways. Moreover, the initial spiritual formation class requires an end-of-semester reflection based upon a series of objectives that frame our curricular structure. In that paper, students are asked to incorporate their personal findings from the POM into a set of learning goals and objectives that we track over the course of their careers. That information is then revisited one final time in their final semester of study. Thus the POM serves as a set of bookends to enable students to track personal growth and development over the course of three years.

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Initially I was advised to offer group interpretations of the POM, and I did so my first semester, but after one such session, I determined that the intrinsic individual findings were of too great a value to squander in a plenary session.

Consequently, I now offer one-on-one interpretive sessions for each of my students at the end of the semester. Those who serve in the academy understand the normal frenzy and pressure that accompanies the last days of school. For my personal schedule, it would be far better to offer a group interpretation, but I am so deeply passionate about the value of the POM that I now carve out significant time to work with our students in understanding the data that is before them. Frankly, it is one of the richest investments I make in the lives of my students and one of the strongest contributions I make to the Kingdom. For what is at stake in the holy conversations that follow is the very nature of the kind of ministers that our school sends forth. That in itself is worth the long hours and countless sessions I schedule to aid our students in the important Kingdom work of being appropriately formed as a minister of the gospel.

Having served as the primary interpreter for our school for eight years, I have seen firsthand the indisputable power of the instrument to aid students in “coming clean” with ambiguous convictions and hidden agendas. At the outset of every new semester I set my students up with a teaser. As I explain the POM process, I tell of my good experiences with the instrument and how invaluable it has been for the students who have gone before them. The students have found great vocational and ministerial clarity as a result of the interpretive conversations.

Typically there is a degree of understandable skepticism about the effectiveness of the instrument among first-year seminarians. They all but say to me, “nothing can be *that* good, Dr. West.” I smile and reply, “Hold that thought until the end of the semester.” Having sifted through hundreds of profiles, I can count on one hand the number of times students have genuinely disagreed with the findings. The overwhelming sentiment of my students is, “How could such an impersonal instrument

give me such an intimate and accurate portrayal of myself?" My greatest joy in the interpretive phase is witnessing the power of honest self-assessment to transform the lives of my students. Many are genuinely unaware of potentially negative behaviors and unwholesome trends in their ministerial identity. The POM provides me, as professor and mentor, the empirical leverage I often need to bring students to a place of authentic self-awareness. When that happens, and it routinely does, the result is a positive and often life-changing result.

I recently received an email from a former student (who incidentally did not graduate) asking if I would provide a letter of reference on her behalf for a graduate program. While I was delighted to assist her in the process, what intrigued me most was her reference to the POM. Evidently her profile empowered and affirmed her belief that God has equipped her to be a counselor. Years later I am encouraged that the POM results remain central to her vocational assessment and ministerial identity.

Not only do the individual profiles provide remarkable insight to students, but the group profiles also offer a glimpse into what is happening within our collective student body. The implications are enormous for virtually every aspect of our school. As we note the prevailing trends, it allows us to gauge the theological images of our first-year students, both their vocational indicators and their personal tendencies. It also allows our recruiting team to assess the kind of students who actually enroll in our school and if those students match the identifiable markers that constitute the DNA of our school. Furthermore, there are curricular implications at stake as well. The vocational trends that develop within group profiles may enable us to keep tabs on the interests of our students and areas where as an institution we need to tweak our curriculum. Frankly, in the past we have not done as much work with the group profiles as we ought, but that trend is already changing, and I envision this resource to remain central to our work.

I am a firm believer in the effectiveness of the POM. It has served our purposes well and continues to contribute to the developing ministerial identity of our students. From my perspective one can hardly ask more of an instrument than that. ♦



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Selected highlights of the fall Entering Student Questionnaire

The 2009–10 group profile from this fall's Entering Student Questionnaire included 5,848 responses from 155 schools. The following highlights should provide a helpful sketch of the overall findings.

Entering student characteristics:

- ♦ Students were most likely to have learned about a school from either a friend, graduate, or pastor, and their first contact with that school was via email or the Internet.
- ♦ Students enrolling in member schools most typically have an undergraduate degree in the social/behavioral sciences, humanities, or technical studies; however, 27.4 percent also have advanced degrees.
- ♦ More than half (54.3%) of the students entering theological school held elected or appointed leadership positions in their local church, another church body, or a religious organization.
- ♦ Students typically come from a suburban church whose membership is 100–249.
- ♦ Slightly more than one third (34.8%) of commuter students travel less than a half-hour; 16.6 percent travel as much as one hour.
- ♦ Nearly one quarter (22.9%) of students have one or two dependents; 13.0 percent have three or more dependents.

Financial support, debt, and employment among entering seminarians:

- ♦ Nearly three in five (61.6%) students consider financial aid assistance a significant consideration in choosing a school.
- ♦ Most students brought no debt with them; however, 13.5 percent had an educational debt load of \$30,000 or more, and 7.6 percent had a noneducational debt load of \$30,000 or more.
- ♦ Full-time students enrolled in an MDiv program intend on working more than twenty hours a week. ♦