BOARDS ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF making decisions that get to the core of the mission and future of the schools they serve. With increasing scrutiny of board oversight by government agencies and the general public, board members need relevant data and other information at their fingertips to ensure that those decisions are well informed and defensible.

Schools that are members of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) have ready access to a wealth of data that can help them plan and make decisions. Board members would be well advised to access the data in the course of their work, to extract the most pertinent information, and to apply that newfound intelligence as they fulfill their fiduciary duties.

What information is available?

Data collection and analysis is one of the core services that ATS provides to member schools. Member schools are obligated to collect and report institutional data, while information about students is collected on an optional, fee-for-service basis. With that data in hand, ATS offers a variety of tools to help a school’s administrators and board understand the school’s current state and how its performance and progress compare with peer institutions and broader industry benchmarks.

What data are available from each source, and who is privy to the results? Board members should make it their business to know.

School data

Q: How do theological schools look from 30,000 feet?

A: Check the Annual Data Tables.

The ATS Commission on Accrediting requires every member school to complete an Annual Report Form (ARF) each fall. The ARF collects detailed data about admissions, enrollment, faculty, salaries, and finances. Completing it requires the painstaking compilation of data by several administrators, usually including the president, chief academic officer, finance officer, development officer, and student personnel officer.

The aggregate information is published each spring in the Annual Data Tables (ADT), which include more than 150 pages of tables and graphs. The confidential information of each school is preserved while the collective data of all 273 members is available to provide benchmarks for schools to use in evaluating their own data.

For those wishing to track long-term trends, the Annual Data Tables going back many years are at www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables.

Q: How does your seminary compare to a few similar schools?

A: Read your IPPR.

The Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR) compares a seminary’s institutional data to similar information from five to 15 peer institutions that have been selected by the seminary itself. The report includes more than 20 tables on enrollment, faculty, and financial data that show compiled averages, highs, medians, and lows.

In selecting peers for comparison, the school may choose a group of similar institutions — for example, a small institution might choose other
small institutions, while a divinity school embedded in a university might choose other embedded divinity schools as its peers. A denominational seminary might choose other seminaries of the same denomination.

Alternatively, the school might identify its peers aspirationally—that is, it might identify as “peers” some institutions whose general profiles align with long-term goals the school has for itself. (Either way, the confidential information reported by each school is protected in the IPPR because a school sees only its own data alongside the aggregate data from multiple other schools.)

As a benefit of ATS membership, ATS institutions are offered one IPPR each year free of charge. Additional IPPRs may be requested at a cost of $100 each. The IPPR is issued to each ATS school’s president each spring. It’s the president’s prerogative whether to share the report with the board.

Q: Compared to the whole universe of accredited theological schools, how are you doing?
A: Read your SIR.

The Strategic Information Report (SIR) takes peer comparison one step further and places an individual school’s institutional data directly in the context of all ATS-accredited schools. Issued only in odd-numbered years, the SIR provides schools with a variety of strategic indicators to help assess their overall strength and recent performance in the areas of admissions, enrollment, finance, and development. It provides longitudinal data to track 10-year trends and compares current data with subsets of other schools that might be considered peer groups.

Like the IPPR, the SIR is a complimentary report issued only to the president of a school, but it can be shared with the board.

### Student data

ATS Student Data Services offers useful tools for schools to understand and track their students and graduates, benchmark their findings in the context of trends in theological education, and inform the work of assessment.

Schools are not required to report student data, but nearly 70 percent do, and the available information represents a broad spectrum of member schools. The data are collected through the use of questionnaires administered to students as they begin and complete their seminary careers, and again five years after graduation.

The Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ), Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ), and Alumni/ae Questionnaire (AQ) track demographics, levels of debt, educational and religious backgrounds, motivations for entering seminary, satisfaction with the effectiveness of the education received, and professional plans and experiences. Participating schools receive a detailed, confidential report.

For the ESQ and GSQ, the annual findings from all participating schools are aggregated in the Total School Profile (TSP). By examining the charts and self-study begin? Does it owe the Board of Commissioners any reports? Are there any special evaluation visits scheduled to address particular issues? Have any notations been imposed?

### Insist on a process that’s simple and sustainable.

Ask the administration to outline its process for assessment and provide regular updates as to how assessment data is being collected, analyzed, and used to implement effective change in the school’s operation.

### Use the data to think strategically.

Think realistically in considering future strategic directions. Where does the school fit in the constantly changing landscape of theological education? What aspirational goals are possible?
tables in the Total School Profile, board members can track trends among a representative pool of more than 13,000 students at ATS schools each year.

In addition, schools that use the student questionnaires will find the data particularly useful when they embark on the self-study process. The ATS Guide to Using Student Questionnaire Data in the Self-Study Process provides a standard-by-standard chart that correlates the student data with the questions posed by the accrediting standards.

What to do with the data
A working familiarity with the institutional and student data available from ATS helps an astute board to ask the right questions, knowing that they can be answered. It gives the board a context in which to evaluate the school’s position, so that it can determine whether that position is typical among schools of its size and structure.

A sample of questions boards can ask and answer using the data:

**Finances**
- How does our financial position compare with that of our peer institutions?
- Do we have adequate human and financial resources to fulfill our mission?

**Students**
- Are we recruiting and accepting students who fit well with our mission and will succeed?
- How are our graduates faring, and what can we learn from their successes and challenges?

**Faculty**
- Is our compensation structure competitive?
- Are we able to attract and retain the caliber of faculty and administrators we need to fulfill our mission?

**Advancement**
- Are our development activities maximizing the giving potential of our pool of prospective supporters while also offering us flexibility in how funds are used?

**Peer comparison**
- Are we positioning the school to compete effectively among the schools we consider to be our peers?

**Why this matters: board accountability**
Ultimately, the board is accountable to various stakeholders for strategic stewardship of the school’s resources in fulfillment of its mission: It is accountable to the public to meet specified standards of educational quality through accreditation with the ATS Commission on Accrediting. It is accountable to its faculty and staff to provide a safe, healthy, and productive work environment. It is accountable to its donors to ensure that their contributions are used in a positive way to support the school. And it is accountable to its students to ensure that they are well prepared to pursue their vocations in ministry, teaching, or other fields. Armed with more and better information, the board can fulfill its fiduciary responsibility, strategically align its mission with its resources, and evaluate its effectiveness. With the power of knowledge, well-informed board members can collectively weather whatever challenges may face the school with confidence and acuity.

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