

ATS Board of Commissioners approves new data sharing policy

By DEBORAH H. C. GIN

Expanded access and collaborative thinking will open the door for new research into theological education. At its June meeting, the ATS Board of Commissioners voted to adopt a new approach to sharing data and cultivating diverse conversations with outside researchers. The new policy promises to expand the scope of inquiry into general issues of theological education as well as more in-depth understanding of ATS member schools, the students who attend them, and the administrators and faculty who serve them. In an interview, Deborah H. C. Gin, ATS director, research and faculty development, explains how expanded research will add to our collective understanding of theological education.

Q: Why this and why now?

Gin: In a world of increasing access to information, people must have access to *quality* information. People are also better equipped when they have access to multiple interpretations of the quality information and when they can engage in substantive discussion with trusted conversation partners.

So it is in the world of theological education. The need for quality information is even greater today—in a time of organizational change and economic uncertainty—than when information (especially bad information) did not flow as freely. Not only this, we are increasingly becoming aware that what works in one set of institutions may not work in another: one size does not fit all. It follows, then, that multiple perspectives on the data are needed to have a more comprehensive picture of the state of



theological education. Imagine the power of knowing the answers to questions like these:

- What is the profile of the school that is most likely to increase in enrollment (or close, merge, have good placement rates)?
- Is increased enrollment (or online engagement, a reduced MDiv) statistically related to financial solvency of the institution?
- What constitutes “institutional health”? Or is there such a thing as an “innovation factor”? What are elements of each?
- Do the financial benefits of online engagement differ statistically by school size (or school structure, region, faculty FTE)?

With the launch of the Association's research function four years ago, it quickly became apparent to me that access to quality data, broader and deeper types of data analysis, and a diversity of interpretations were needed for the future of theological education, but ATS is limited in staff resources. The great news is that, within

this world of theological education, we *have* the human resources needed for this expanded research. We just need to provide broader access to the data. Ultimately, my vision is to build a robust body of literature on the study of theological education, to build a new field of study.

A task force of the ATS Board of Commissioners met over two semesters to craft this new policy and polled presidents and deans of ATS schools to gather their opinions about data sharing.¹

As expected, the reasons that respondents gave for sharing institutional data more widely included better information to make strategic decisions, building trust with shared information, and benefits to the association of schools. More than 75% of respondents said they are moderately or completely comfortable with providing greater access to institutional data. Another 12% are somewhat comfortable, and only 4% said they are not at all comfortable. So it appears that the Board of Commissioners' vote aligns with the sentiment of a majority of the schools.

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Q: What kinds of datasets will become available?

Gin: Data about the schools that are submitted annually will become available through this new policy. The categories of information range from enrollment, completions, and placements, to finances, faculty, and library data.

Some of this information is already available to the public (in the Annual Data Tables) and to the chief administrative officer of each school (through the Strategic Information Report or Institutional Peer Profile Report) in table form.

With the new policy, however, individual researchers can request raw data for purposes of research and deeper analysis. School and individual names will be removed from datasets, as will sensitive data such as individual salaries, and requesters must complete and sign a formal request protocol to ensure that sensitive data remain confidential. The new policy also provides individuals at a given school access to their own school's data.

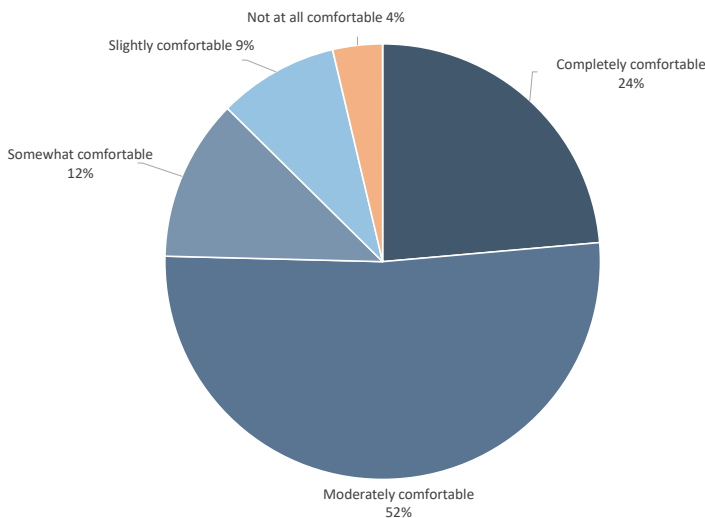
Q: Who will have access to the data?

Gin: The new policy is organized by end-user category, including, for example, individual researchers, research organizations, religious groups, and individual constituents at ATS member schools. Three different approval levels govern the kinds of data that persons within each end-user category can access and how. Most datasets will come with a charge, in order to cover administrative costs to assemble the data and to signal the data's value to the membership.

Q: How will sensitive information be safeguarded?

Gin: As expected, the top two concerns named in the poll to presidents and deans were confidentiality and misuse of data. ATS staff share these concerns. The new policy, in conjunction with the data request protocol, addresses confidentiality in strict fashion, outlining expectations, for example, of how data will be published, viewing of the data, handling of data storage, and others. In addition,

Comfort Level with Providing Greater Access to Institutional Data



¹ The poll was conducted in April 2018. Presidents and deans at each school were invited, and 162 schools responded, corresponding to a 59% response rate (well above the typical 35% rate of online surveys). The response set was very well represented by country, ecclesial family, structure (embeddedness), and size of the school.

the new policy and the request protocol include statements about the consequences of the misuse of data or publication of misleading inferences.

Data provided in raw datasets will be scrubbed so that school and individual persons' names are not included. Individual salaries will also be removed. While other sensitive data (i.e., variables that, when used in combination, can identify an individual or school) may be part of the dataset, this is typical of datasets that researchers use. Completion of an extensive request protocol will be required of users of these data; the form outlines confidentiality expectations, handling and disposal of sensitive data, approval of the receiving institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and other safeguards. Members of the [ATS Research and Data Advisory Committee](#) provided expertise and guidance in the construction of this request protocol.

Individuals requesting data about their own schools will be required to submit the request in written form and obtain approval from the ATS executive director and from their schools' chief administrative officers.

Q: Will new research directives be guided or monitored in any way?

Gin: Our hope with this new policy is that researchers will find ATS institutional and research data to be a deep well of information on theological education. ATS needs partners in this work of developing a field of the study of theological education. The ATS Research and Data Advisory Committee functions as a launch point for the big questions we need answered. On its developing research

webpage, ATS will list both the larger research topics and questions we plan to address, as well as examples of available datasets. ATS will also invite proposals, as well as commission partner researchers, for these particular foci. I would encourage anyone who is searching for a research topic—or who has a research question that aligns with an ATS focus of study—to contact me.

Q: What are you hoping to learn through this expanded research initiative?

Gin: It is a time of great change in higher education, with institutional leaders and higher education pundits increasingly addressing topics related to alternative models of education. Inside Higher Ed, for example, recently completed a study on *The Growing Role of Mergers in Higher Ed*. Theological education is likewise undergoing its own changes, some related to higher education but others specific to this context of educating religious leaders.

Expanding the Association's research function will enable the possibility of developing a robust body of research literature on the study of theological education, which can serve schools as a resource of good information as they make important decisions in a time of great change. The aim is to better equip administrators, boards, faculty, and other constituencies with knowledge about theological education. The best way to do this is by providing quality analysis and interpretation of the field's data.

[Read the policy in full](#) and watch for future announcements as this initiative is rolled out and suggested lines of inquiry are developed.



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