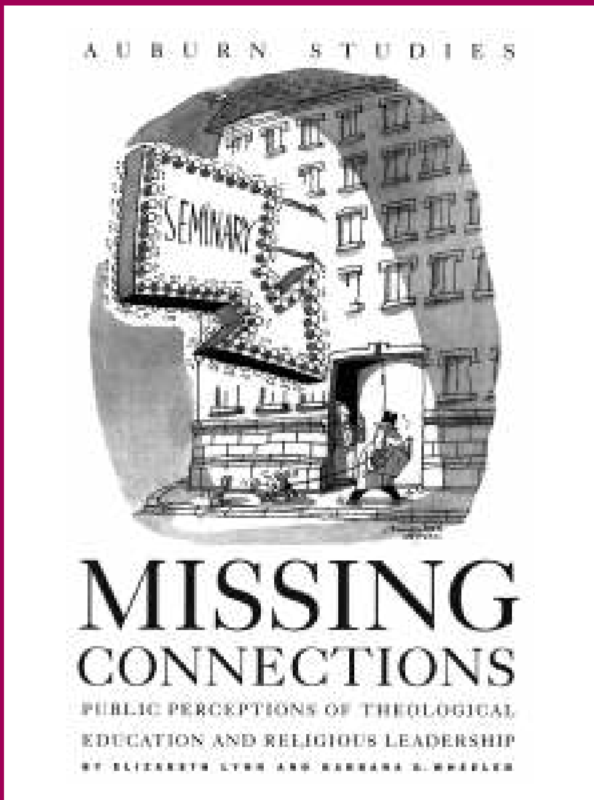
Auburn Theological Seminary

MAKING CONNECTIONS

A Guide
for
Conducting
Perception Studies



This Workbook is a companion piece to "Missing Connections," a study by Auburn Theological Seminary.

The study was developed into workbook form by David Bushko and written and edited by Sharon L. Miller, Barbara G. Wheeler and Elizabeth Lynn.

Auburn Resources, January 2002

What is a perception study?

This guide provides step-by-step assistance for theological schools that want to conduct perception studies in their cities or regions.

What is a perception study?

A perception study is an organized way of finding out how others look at an institution.

It attempts to answer some basic questions: How well known is the institution? What kind of reputation does it have in the community? What is it known for?

It can measure the institution's impact on the community: What do others see as its primary strengths? What does it bring to the community? Is its voice heard?

It provides a series of recommendations and conclusions that the institution adopts in order to better fulfill its mission.

Why do a perception study?

There are at least three reasons why theological schools might want to do this.

❶ **A perception study can help these schools be more successful.** North American religion, along with the rest of social life, is becoming increasingly local and particularistic. In this environment, people trust and support institutions of which they have some personal knowledge, rather than those, however large and prestigious, that they know only by general report. Many seminaries have noticed this trend in recent years as they have begun to draw increasing numbers of students from their local areas.

As this trend continues, theological schools will have to find more students and support from those who know them personally, even if they are not members of the school's immediate religious family. If local community members think the school is a civic, cultural and educational asset, they will help keep it financially viable.

A perception study can help leaders in theological schools get their bearings and find their way in this effort. It can tell them how the school is currently perceived in their community or region and give them a basis in reality for moving toward their desired perception by critical audiences.

❷ **A perception study can help a seminary meet its ethical obligations.** Seminaries are supported not only by those who make gifts to them directly, but also by the local community and the whole society, which exempts theological schools from paying taxes and, in some cases, provides support from public funds. Gratitude for what amounts to major support obligates these schools to active, responsible civic behavior.

Again, a study like this one can be helpful. It can enable administrators to determine how well they are fulfilling their ethical obligation. It can also help them identify where community leaders think that seminaries can improve their efforts. These insights can help guide current and future program development.

❸ Most important, a perception study can help theological schools fulfill their mission and purpose.

The direct beneficiaries of the work of theological schools are the religious communities that seminary graduates are trained to serve, but the wider horizon of theological education is the world that religious communities serve by means of their ministries. For all their diversity, each of our religious traditions is a treasury of wisdom about what matters and how we should live together under God. Some of that wisdom is reserved for religious bodies, but more of it is given for the life of the world. Therefore, theological schools must train religious leaders who will teach and proclaim religious truth in the context of public discourse with power, integrity, true civility and freedom.

A perception study can help a theological school understand how well it serves the wider society, both directly through leaders that educate members of the public who are not its regular students, and indirectly through graduates who participate in public life and lead organizations that are visible in the public arena. This public service is not an additional, optional form of service for a theological school. It is part of its core mission: to make available religious values and ideas not only for the adherents of its own tradition, but also for the common good.

What we already know about public perceptions of theological education

Seminaries are virtually invisible to leaders of secular organizations and institutions, even those in the seminaries' own cities and regions.

This was the basic finding of "Missing Connections," a study by Auburn Theological Seminary. This study, which focused on four cities, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Portland and Shreveport, found that the seminaries in those areas are known to only a fairly small circle of insiders of their own religious tradition – denominational executives, clergy, and members of some congregations that are either large or located close to the seminaries. As a result, they are generally viewed neither as civic nor educational assets by their communities.

The invisibility of the institutions is mirrored by their inhabitants. Seminary leaders are seldom seen in civic life, and they themselves report rarely going there. Seminary faculty members' time outside the school is spent in scholarly and church activities, rather than civic ones. Seminary presidents are not much different; generally, they are not visible beyond the school and its church constituency.

This tendency carries over to those the seminaries train. Religious leaders and institutions, whether Roman Catholic, evangelical or mainline Protestant, are not usually involved in public life. Instead, secular leaders believe church leaders are focused primarily on caring for their own, reserving the care of others for emergencies. In the public's view, church leaders seldom convene forums for discussing critical public issues, nor are they engaged in the process of helping to articulate those issues. And, perhaps because of public indifference to religion, they are not invited.

There is one major exception. African-American ministers (and seminary presidents as well) are better known in public forums than their white peers. Indeed, they seem to consider it a part of their job descriptions to be active and visible in public life. Consequently, both they and their institutions are well-recognized in the black community, and the leaders themselves are known and respected more widely still.

Because of seminaries' lack of public involvement, social leaders and laity have given little thought to the nature and importance of theological training, although they do have opinions on the quality of clergy. While most seem to feel that the academic education of clergy is adequate, they are also concerned about the quality of the education, and the quality of the people entering into ministry.

Some think that those entering the ministry bring limited maturity and intelligence, and wonder whether the low status and pay scale for ministers discourages able people from the profession.

The more general concern, however, is that something is missing from the education that future religious leaders receive. There is disagreement about what is lacking. Some clergy and religious executives call for more "practical" training, while other observers think that the problem is insufficient theological and spiritual formation. Most agree that, for whatever reason, many of today's religious leaders have trouble helping people to *make connections*, to see what difference religious values and commitments make in one's personal life, in the community of believers, and in the life of the community beyond.

This guide is intended to help you conduct a perception study. We suggest that you read through the entire manual to understand what needs to be done and in what order. Then, come back to the beginning and proceed as described.

The Appendix to this guide includes two practical tools you should find helpful. One is a questionnaire. It provides the basic questions you need to ask during the interviewing process.

The other tool is a presentation template. This can help you organize the study's findings and pull them together quickly for presentations to those individuals or groups whose approval and participation are required for implementing the study's recommendations. You can use this template in text form or convert it into a graphics presentation, using presentation software, such as PowerPoint.

Initial considerations

Getting started

The first step toward a perception study is to decide to do it. The initiative may come from any one of several places in the school community, such as:

- A board of trustees or directors that wants guidance for long-range or strategic planning
- A president setting personal and institutional goals for a new or renewed term
- Administrators of recruitment or financial development programs that need to know how the public sees the school
- Faculty members or committees that need program feedback for accreditation review or educational planning.

Whatever person or group decides to undertake the study should, as a first step, appoint a committee to design and oversee it. The committee should include representatives of the groups or offices that have the greatest interest in the study's results.

Designing the study

The study design should answer two questions: What do you want to know, and who can tell you what you want to know?

What do you want to know?

The perception study described in this guide is focused on two general issue areas: how seminaries are perceived by both insiders and outsiders, and how religious leaders and their institutions are viewed by the wider public.

Your committee should spend time making these general areas specific to your situation. Here are some suggested questions, intended to help you focus on your particular information requirements:

How is our school perceived by those who know it well and those who don't?

What efforts have we made to reach the public? How well do those "inside" the school (faculty, students, administrators, board members) think these efforts have worked?

What is our image among those who know us pretty well (donors, congregations that have close ties to us, our denomination's leaders, etc.)?

How are we perceived by congregations and religious groups that aren't closely linked to us? By the general public in this city or region? By leaders of other institutions?

What would various constituencies like the seminary to be that it currently is not, or provide that it does not?

Who can tell you what you want to know?

Social leaders

- Elected public officials
- Appointed public officials/urban planners
- College or university presidents and deans
- Community activists
- Head of the local Chamber of Commerce or similar organizations
- Heads of non-governmental, non-religious social agencies, such as the United Way

Community members

- Major business leaders
- Religion reporters from your local or regional newspaper, radio and television stations

Religious Community

- Local clergy, including some of the school's graduates
- Lay leaders and members of local congregations
- Religious executives; heads of religious agencies

Seminary Community

- Board members
- Faculty
- Administrators
- Student

Who should conduct the study?

Once you know your objectives, you can decide who should conduct the study. This comes down to essentially two alternatives, do it yourself or commission it externally. Each has pros and cons.

If you choose to conduct the study yourself, you will reap the benefits of learning firsthand how the community perceives you. You will be better able to interpret the nuances of conversations, to guide the questioning, and to bring about action after the study is completed. You will *know* the material in a very personal way.

The downside of doing it yourself is that it takes time and resources. You need to decide, therefore, what your priorities are and whether conducting this study is the best way to use your resources at this time.

The alternative to doing it yourself is to have this work done by an outside person or firm, so that the information will be available for study and action when it is needed. This, too, has both benefits and deficiencies. On the upside, you gain the aid of an expert, usually someone from the sociology department or business school of a local university, who can help refine and enhance your effort.

Equally important, this approach encourages greater candor. Interviewees can talk about you honestly without damaging their relationship with you. The result is more accurate information.

The downside is that most people who do this charge a fee of some sort. One suggestion to minimize costs is to inquire at a university about whether there is a business or sociology graduate student who might be interested in helping you with your project.

Another downside is that no one will be as familiar with your situation or as intimate with what you want to find out as you are. Therefore, you have to be sure to brief your researcher carefully and to review the work at key stages to ensure that he or she is obtaining the right information. The planning document prescribed during the goal-setting stage can be an invaluable tool during this process.

Once you have decided whether to conduct the study yourself or obtain the services of a professional researcher, you can proceed to the interviewing process.

Drafting questions

In Appendix A you will find a series of interview questions for your different audiences. Carefully go over these questions, tailoring them for your own institution.

Arranging appointments

When arranging appointments you should identify yourself and your institution. Tell the individual that you are conducting a perception study on behalf of your institution and explain what the study is intended to achieve. You should also tell them that you will not quote them by name or in ways that could identify them.

Finally, ask for permission to tape the session in order to review the interview later. Some people may initially be apprehensive about being tape recorded, but most quickly forget the recorder's presence when they get involved in the conversation. For those who are hesitant, you might explain that you value their thoughts and opinions, and that recording provides an accurate record of the conversation.

You might also let those who agree to an interview know the types of questions you will be asking, so they have time to think about them ahead of time. Often people have given little, if any, consideration to these questions and you will receive more thoughtful responses if they too come prepared to the interview.

How many interviews are enough?

A frequent question that people ask at this stage in a study is, "How many people should I interview?" This question is difficult to answer because the answer depends on so many factors.

It is costly to carry out a study such as this one. The interview process can be lengthy and the cost of transcriptions can quickly mount. Your budget might be the determining factor in how large a sample you interview.

Perception studies capture how an institution or organization is viewed by the public or a specific constituency. In such a study, it is more important to interview a broad spectrum of the community, than it is to have a statistically valid sample. *Who* you choose to interview is more important than *how many* people you interview. If you have identified your key constituencies and local community leaders, you have already begun to define the number of people to interview.

Be prepared

Before going to the interview itself, you should review background material on the interviewee, the study's objectives and issues, and the questions you will be asking.

If you are taping the interviews, you need to be sure *in advance* that you have an unobtrusive recorder with fresh batteries and a high-quality tape. You will also need a writing pad and some pens.

Once you are at the interview and the recorder is in position for taping, ask the interviewee to say "1-2-3-testing" in a normal tone of voice. Then, rewind and play back to ensure that the recorder is close enough to pick up the speaker's voice, and that all is working well.

Listening

You should, however, be prepared to use the tape recorder as a tool, not a crutch. The fact that you are taping the interview, does not mean you can ask questions and then "tune out." You need to listen actively. This involves being aware of the speaker's entire message—the words, tone of voice and body language. To be a good listener, you need to take in all three actively and thoughtfully.

Remain objective

When listening, the focus should be on what the speaker is saying, not how it agrees or disagrees with your values, judgments and beliefs. In short, work to achieve an objective understanding of what the speaker is saying, without judging the speaker or his or her message. This point is particularly important to remember if you, or someone from your seminary, is conducting the study. It will be very tempting to correct misconceptions or inform people about your seminary, rather than "only" listen.

Explore and follow up

Initially people will often respond to a question with what they think *you* want to hear. Or if they have never really thought about the question before, they may say the first thing that comes into their heads. It is important to ask questions that move them beyond those set responses. Use this opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings and progress beyond generalities. Are there specific examples they can give? Are there stories they can tell?

Be encouraging

In general, we hear much faster than we speak. This means we can absorb and understand what someone is saying much faster than they can say it. Use this extra time to formulate questions and comments that will help you better understand the message. Reflect back to the speaker what you have heard, and ask further questions. This will let the speaker know that you understand what he or she is saying and want to hear more.

Review immediately

Immediately, or as soon as possible after each conversation, take a few minutes to go over your notes and jot down your thoughts and impressions from the interview. Was the person willing and eager to talk with you? Did the person's body language match his or her verbal language? Were there phrases that particularly stand out in your mind? Are there questions you wish you had asked?

It is useful to use an alternative color of ink when making your comments after the interview, to differentiate them from the notes taken during the interview. These notes will become an invaluable companion to the interview tapes.

It is easy to skip this reviewing step in the process, but you will regret it later!

Managing the data

It is important to label all your tapes and notes accurately, so you can coordinate the two without revealing people's names. Numbering them sequentially is the easiest way to do this – with perhaps a code system to identify what segment of your community the interviewee is from. So for example your first interviewee, who is a civic leader, may be identified as "CV.1" or "1.CV." Your second interviewee, who is an elected official, may be identified as "E.2" or "2.E" etc.

Make sure you clearly differentiate between your notes (taken either during or after the interview) and the transcripts. One way is to add an "N" for notes, before or after the identity number of the interviewee. (e.g. 1.CV.n)

As you move text or data around in the analysis stage, it is crucial that you keep track of where it originally came from. The identity number of the interviewee should follow each sentence or paragraph that you move, so you can check the accuracy of your excerpts, or place your quotes in context.

Analyzing and interpreting your data

It is difficult to keep the process of data collection and analysis separate. In a very real sense, your analysis begins with the first interview. You will find yourself, for instance, looking for commonalities and re-emerging themes among the interviews. You should, however, avoid in-depth analysis until all interviews have been completed and all tapes have been transcribed.

Reducing the text

Your transcriptions will generate an enormous amount of text. The next step then, is to read through the material carefully and using a colored pencil or marker, bracket sentences and paragraphs of particular interest to you and your study. You do not need to analyze why they are important; you just need to indicate which portions of the text you need to pay attention to later. This winnowing process will reduce your material to a more manageable level.

Organizing the text

At this stage you will begin to divide the bracketed text into categories or segments. One way to organize the text is to color code responses to the questions that you have asked. For instance: Use a yellow marker to indicate comments related to people's general perceptions of religious institutions. Use a green marker to indicate people's specific perceptions of your seminary. Use a blue marker to indicate people's comments about the process of training religious leadership, etc. Or you can develop some simple notation system to indicate your categories.

Finding themes

Now is a good time to reacquaint yourself with the general goals of your study and the specific questions you wanted to answer. Your interviews should reveal how your seminary is viewed both by insiders and outsiders, and how religious leaders and their institutions are viewed by the wider public.

Read, read and re-read your organized segments until you begin to see the themes or patterns that emerge from the text. Initially these themes will be, and indeed must be, tentative. As you continue combing through the interviews and your notes, they will become clearer and sharper. The process is similar to developing a photo. At first, the image appears as a shadow, but, given time, it takes on form and color and, finally, stands out in sharp relief. If you let them, the themes will emerge from the text.

Once you've identified your themes, you need to organize them. Merge themes if needed, subdivide others. Look for connections that can be made between them. Though perception studies don't usually rely upon statistically valid samplings, you may want to keep track of how often certain themes came up in your interviews, just to guide you in determining the relative importance of each.

The final step in your analysis is to make sense of what you have found. Your data does not speak for itself; it is filtered through your experience and knowledge. What did you learn during the process of interviewing and sorting the data? What surprises did you find? What ideas were confirmed? What do you understand now that you did not know before? In developing your final report, it will help to spend some time reflecting on these questions.

It will also be of great benefit to gather the original committee members together and review the findings before presenting them to a larger audience. They can help in the process of refining themes, making connections between findings and organizing your final report.

Some things to keep in mind during your analysis

❶ Remember that themes are more important than sources. It will be tempting to organize your report according to how a particular constituency responded, while ignoring the possibility that others outside that constituency felt the same way. The best way to avoid this pitfall is to organize your data according to themes. Your sources become the backdrop for your themes and inform your themes, but they are not the primary focus.

❷ You will no doubt gather some memorable stories and vivid responses in the course of your interviews. It is tempting to report on these, because they make good sound bites. However, when these stories are not representative of your overall findings, you should avoid using them, since they can mislead your audience.

❸ A final warning: Be sure you do not discard information because it is not what you expected or wanted to find out. Sometimes unexpected and startling findings turn out to be the most interesting and useful. Mull over them for a while and see if they, in fact, might prove valuable.

Reporting

When you have completed these steps you are ready to develop your report. Appendix B provides a template to use in reporting your findings, *but this is only a suggestion.* Your findings, and your audience, should determine your final reporting format. A more detailed reporting instrument can be found on the Auburn web site.

The following questions are based on the ones used in the Auburn study. You may want to tailor and/or expand them to meet your specific goals and address the issues most important to your institution. Otherwise, you can use them as presented here.

Interview session A: Community leaders

Introduction: I'm doing a study for (theological school name). We are interested in learning how respected community leaders, such as yourself, view religious leaders and their training. As we explained when we first contacted you, we won't quote you by name or in ways that could identify you. We do, however, appreciate your permission to tape and transcribe this interview.

1. Can you tell me briefly what sort of experiences you have had with religious institutions? (If interviewing a reporter, "Have you done any stories on seminaries or the state of religious leadership?")
2. How well do you think religious institutions are doing? What makes you think that? Can you give examples or personal experiences?
3. What do you think of the quality of the religious leadership you've observed? (Depending upon the response, you can probe further. Is the individual talking about local leadership? National? Examine value statements. "It's pretty good." "What makes it good?" Etc.)
4. What do you think religious institutions should be trying to accomplish that they are not? Why do you think these goals should be part of a religious institution's mission?
5. What do you know about how religious leaders are trained? How well do you think seminaries and divinity schools are doing at training these leaders? What could they do to improve? Do you know anything about the views of others in your field? What are those views?
6. Do you or your colleagues have any contact with the seminar(y/ies) in this area? What is its/their impact on your work? On the community? Would you like to have more of a connection? Why? What form might it take?

Interview session B: Laity

Introduction: I'm doing a study for (theological school name). We are interested in what church and community leaders, such as yourself, think of religious leaders and their training. As we explained when we first contacted you, we will not identify your church, or quote you by name or in any way that could identify you. We do, however, appreciate your permission to tape and transcribe this interview.

(Ask for names, occupations, length of membership in the church, kind of involvement with the church.)

1. We are trying to get a sense of how well church members think clergy are trained. Can you tell us what you know about how this is done? (Probe depending upon specificity of responses. "What do you think they are learning? Is this worthwhile? Overall, what would you say these schools are doing right, and what could they do better?")

❷ (For churches that choose their ministers): When you look for a minister for this church, how important is their educational background? What do you look for? Are there things you try to avoid?

❸ What contact have you had with (name of theological school)? What sort of impact has it had on your congregation?

❹ How do you think (name of theological school) is viewed in your church? In the broader church? What is it best known for? Least liked for?

❺ How do you think the community views it? What is it best known for? Least liked for?

Interview session C: Church agency officials

Introduction: I'm doing a study for (theological school name). We are interested in what church and community leaders, such as you, think of theological schools. As we explained when we first contacted you, we will not quote you by name or in ways that could identify you. We do, however, appreciate your permission to tape and transcribe this interview.

❶ What contact have you had with theological schools? Can you tell us what they do?

❷ How well do you think they are doing in providing basic training for religious leaders? What do you think are the most important things seminaries are doing these days? Least important? What could they do better? How might that be done?

❸ What contact have you had with (name of theological school)? What sort of impact has it had on this denomination in this area?

❹ How do you think (name of theological school) is viewed by the churches in this area? In the broader church? What is it best known for? Least liked for?

❺ How do you think the community views (name of theological school)? What is it best known for? Least liked for?

Interview session D: Clergy

Introduction: I'm doing a study for (theological school name). We are interested in what church and community leaders, such as you, think of theological schools. As I explained when I first contacted you, we will not quote you by name or in ways that could identify you. We do, however, appreciate your permission to tape and transcribe this interview.

❶ What has been the range of your involvement with theological schools?

❷ How well do you think they are doing at providing basic training for religious leaders? What do they do well? What could they do better?

❸ In your own career, what features of your seminary training have *others* perceived as assets? As drawbacks? What have *you* perceived as assets? As drawbacks? Looking back on your seminary education, are there some things you would change?

❹ What contact have you had with (name of theological school)? Probe.

❺ How do you think your congregation views (name of theological school)? How do you think the broader church views it? What is this school best known for? Least liked for?

❻ How do you think the community views (name of theological school)? What is it best known for? Least liked for?

Interview session E: Seminary administrators, faculty, students and board

Introduction: I'm doing a study for (name of theological school). I have been asking church and community leaders what they think of this school. To help us assess what we are learning, we need to know how you perceive the school and how you think it ought to be perceived. As we said when we first contacted you, we won't quote you by name or in ways that could identify you. We do, however, appreciate your permission to tape and transcribe this interview.

1. How do you think church and community leaders view this school? What do you think it's best known for? What do you think it's least liked for? What do you think they'll tell us is good about theological training? What do you think they'll say should be changed?
2. What efforts has this school made to reach out to the community? To local churches? The broader church? How successful have these efforts been? What could it have done better? What more would you like to see it do?
3. What are the major ways this institution has changed in recent years?

Appendix B: Presentation template

The following outline can help you organize your findings for presenting to key individuals and groups. Remember that this is only a suggested outline. Make changes as needed to fit your material and findings.

Introduction: What we did

1. Why we conducted this study (Reasons)
2. What we wanted to learn (Goals)
3. How we collected data (Research methods, including number and kinds of interviews conducted)

Findings: What we heard

1. Perceptions of the seminary
2. Perceptions of religious leaders and institutions
3. Perceptions of the training of religious leaders

Interpretation: What it means

This section offers the writer(s) of the report an opportunity to highlight certain patterns in the data, raise questions for further exploration, reflect on the findings, etc. For instance, a school might include commentaries on the findings by a variety of school stakeholders (a faculty member, a board member, an administrator, a student).

Conclusion: So what?

1. Review of findings and implications
2. Recommended next steps

DESIGN: ROB MORGAN

About
Auburn Theological Seminary

Auburn Seminary was founded in 1818 by the presbyteries of central New York State. Progressive theological ideas and ecumenical sensibilities guided Auburn's original work of preparing ministers for frontier churches and foreign missions. After the seminary relocated from Auburn, New York to the campus of Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1939, Auburn ceased to grant degrees, but its commitment to progressive and ecumenical theological education remained firm.

As a free-standing seminary working in close cooperation with other institutions, Auburn found new forms for its educational mission: programs of serious, sustained theological education for laity and practicing clergy; a course of denominational studies for Presbyterians enrolled at Union; and research into the history, aims and purposes of theological education.

In 1991, building on its national reputation for research, Auburn established the Center for the Study of Theological Education to foster research on current issues on theological education, an enterprise that Auburn believes is critical to the well-being of religious communities and the world that they serve.

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