



Efficacy of the Church's Practices for Assessing the Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

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National Association of Catholic Theological Schools

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Placing Social Science Research at the Service of the Catholic Church Since 1964

Agenda

- Review some of the trends in the data for the five surveys, with many of the questions asked on more than one survey
- Way too many details to possibly cover them all, but the report is available for you to read into the findings more deeply
- Will cover the highlights and my take on some findings worthy of further reflection

FIVE SURVEY GROUPS FOR THE STUDY

- U.S. diocesan bishop ordinaries – 103 respondents for a 53% response rate
- U.S. diocesan vocation directors – 53 rs for a 33% response rate
- Rectors of U.S. seminarians – 27 rs for a 59% response rate
- Formators or spiritual directors of U.S. seminarians – 98 rs, response rate unknown
- Mental health professionals who work with U.S. seminaries – 59 rs, response rate unknown

MAIN TOPICS OF THE STUDY

- Effectiveness of seminary formation efforts
- Role of psychological services in seminary formation efforts
- Effectiveness of the psychological evaluations
- Assessments of the suitability of candidates

EFFECTIVENESS OF SEMINARY FORMATION EFFORTS

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

How often do you have an in-depth meeting (virtually, by phone, or in-person) with the seminary you use most frequently about the candidates from your Diocese there?

Percentage responding

	Bishops	Vocation Directors
	%	%
Never or rarely	9	4
Once a year	43	13
Every semester	33	61
More than once a semester	15	22

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

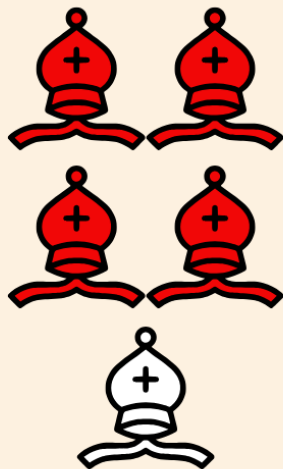
Evaluating the Church's Practices in Assessing the Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

commissioned by



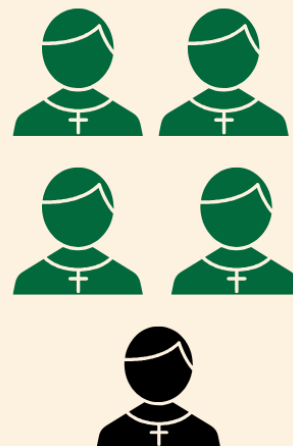
University of Notre Dame

Four in five Bishops
(90%)



“agree” or “strongly agree”
that they are
satisfied
overall with the formation
programs at their seminaries

Vocation directors
(84%)



BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

Bishops and vocation directors were asked to assess how confident they are about the formation at their seminaries in 28 distinct areas.

Examining their responses together, both groups are *most* likely to have great confidence in these two areas of formation:

- Seminarians' openness to growing spiritually – 55% to 59% are “very confident” in their seminary's formation in this area
- Regular engagement in self-reflection – 36% to 49%

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

These are the three areas of formation that both bishops and vocation directors are *least* likely to say they have great confidence in at their seminaries:

- Seminarians' healthy management of one's neuroses or minor pathologies – 19% to 21% are “very confident” in their seminary's formation this area
- Healthy living with medical concerns or physical limitations – 17% for both
- Dealing with learning disabilities – 16% to 17%

RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Rectors, formators/spiritual directors, and mental health professionals were also asked to assess how confident they are about the formation at their seminaries in the same 28 distinct areas. Examining their responses together, all three survey groups list these areas of formation among those they are *most* likely to have great confidence in, the top two of which were also mentioned above by the bishops and vocation directors:

- Seminarians' openness to growing spiritually – 48% to 62% are “very confident” in their seminary’s formation in this area
- Regular engagement in self-reflection – 22% to 55%
- Seeking treatment for mental health issues such as depression or anxiety – 32% to 43%
- Ability to form healthy relationships with others – 32% to 43%

RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Among these three survey groups, these are the four formation areas they are *least* likely to express great confidence in, one of which was also listed by the bishops and vocation directors above:

- Seminarians' healthy management of one's neuroses or minor pathologies – 11% to 23% are “very confident” in their seminary's formation in this area
- Growth in understanding one's sexual orientation – 8% to 22%
- Healthy management of one's unhealthy or addictive behaviors – 4% to 22%
- Management of past unethical behaviors, such as dishonesty and financial mismanagement – 16% to 17%

ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS



15%
of Bishops



27%
of Vocation
Directors

Do “**not agree**” or “**agree a little**” that psychological services should play a significant role in determining the suitability of a candidate for advancement

Rectors and
formators/spiritual
directors
(37-49%)

2X
as likely as

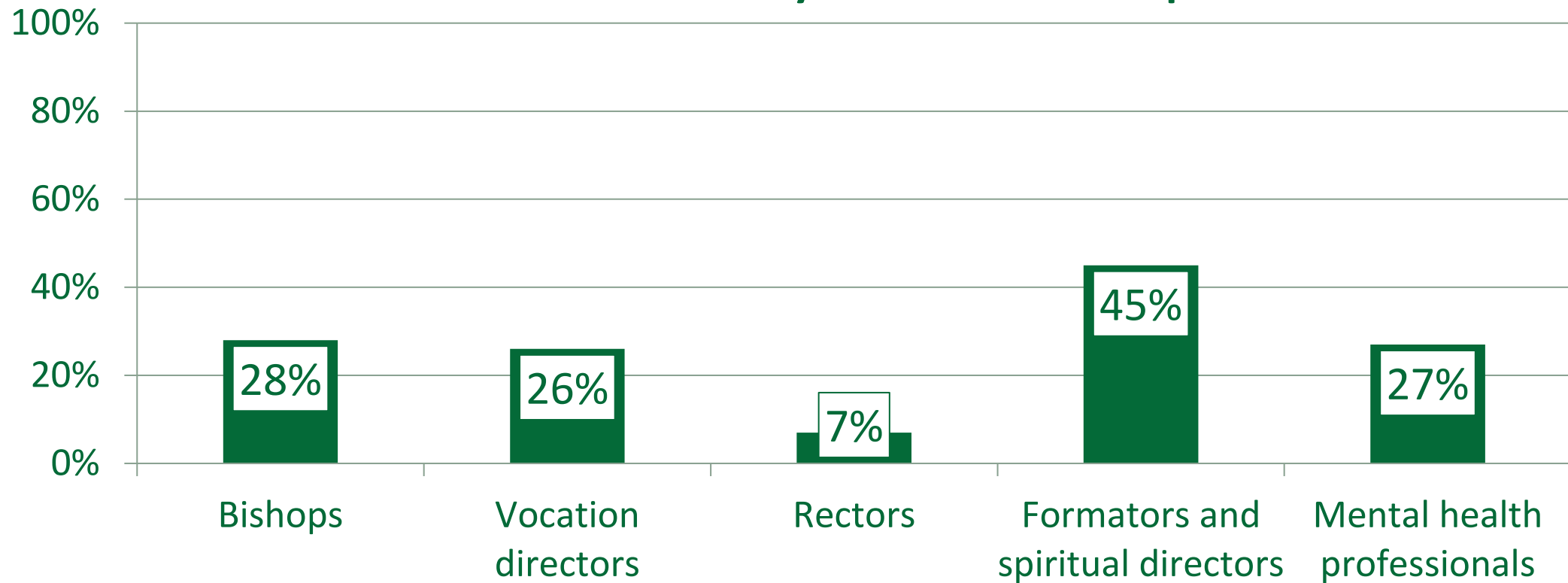
Mental health
professionals
(18%)

to “**strongly agree**” that effective,
measurable, and personalized benchmarks
are utilized well for seminarian formation

ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES IN SEMINARY FORMATION EFFORTS

ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

**Those Saying They are *Not* Familiar Enough with the USCCB's
2008 Guidelines/Guidance on the Use of Psychological
Services in Seminary Formation to Respond**



ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

For screening candidates before they enter seminaries, how helpful do you find the USCCB's 2008 guidelines/guidance on the use of psychological services in seminary formation to be?

Percentage responding

	Not at All Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful	
	%	%	%	%
Bishops	0	22	36	42
Formators and spiritual directors	0	21	48	31
Vocation directors	2	31	36	31
Rectors	0	36	44	20
Mental health professionals	2	40	40	19

RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

In our seminary, throughout the formation process (not just the initial evaluation), psychological services play a significant role in determining the suitability of a candidate for advancement or for Orders

	Rectors	Formators and Spiritual Directors	Mental Health Professionals
	%	%	%
Do not agree	7	5	3
Somewhat agree	15	11	25
Agree	48	43	44
Strongly agree	30	41	28



FORMATORS

Formator: At our seminary, a mental health professional comes to some formation meetings, so, which is to say...they speak about some topics to the men. But in terms of our formators meetings where we evaluate the men or talk about how they're doing, there's never a mental health professional a part of those. I'd welcome it, but I'm not sure...We don't have a mental health professional on the staff, as I understand There has been in the past. The downsides with that were that sometimes the men didn't feel free to go to him because he was kind of on staff. And I think the latest idea, the latest operating principle is that the men feel more free to pursue help if it's a counselor who's outside of the staff.

RECTORS

Rector: Here at [Seminary Name], we have a full-time clinical psychologist on our faculty. [...] He walks me, our academic dean and our vice rector, through each profile when it's received, gives his own commentary, oh, here is what this indicates, or this is not a major concern. You mentioned jargon earlier. Sometimes he helps us sort through some of that and gives his overall assessments of each candidate based on the report. And then later, he meets in person with each candidate. And it is not a repeat psych eval, though some dioceses do use this faculty member to do their psych evals.

RECTORS

Rector: CONT'D He meets every candidate in-person. And then based on about an hour to an hour and a half long interview with them, plus the written assessment of another psychologist, he gives an overall opinion to us. He then also counsels students in the seminary as needed, whether they have serious red or yellow flags, or whether they simply want to talk to a counselor about something that's on their heart. He's been a wonderful person for us. [...] He is also so approachable. He's low key. He's a deeply committed Catholic. And the seminarians know he's here to serve a certain critical purpose. He sometimes needs to call them to task to bring things to their attention they don't want to talk about, yet he's also deeply supportive of them. And that means a lot.

MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Mental health professionals were asked both in the surveys and the interviews to suggest ways seminary rectors, formators and faculty members could better utilize psychological services in their seminaries. They are especially likely to mention these four ways:

- Giving mental health professionals more guidance and feedback about how their evaluations and services can better assist seminaries and dioceses – mentioned by 48% of all mental health professional respondents
- Providing training for formators about how to get the most out of the evaluations and counseling services provided – 23%
- Requiring more robust testing in the psychological evaluations and more frequent testing and evaluations – 23%
- Better integrating mental health professionals into seminary formation teams – 16%

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

In your experience, how effective is the initial psychological evaluation for identifying issues related to the suitability of a candidate for formation?

Percentage responding

	Bishops	Vocation Directors
	%	%
Not as effective as other tools our Diocese uses	2	0
About as effective as other tools	30	19
One of the most effective tools	58	62
The most effective tool	10	19

VOCATION DIRECTORS

Vocation Director: I think the biggest thing for me is more of a gut feeling thing than anything from my particular experience. But I'm going to put a lot of emphasis on the front end, like before they enter seminary, and I thought about some of the, especially like the young men just graduating high school, it's like, how much scrutiny can we put on this guy? How much is he going to change over the years before we get there? So, for me, a big topic and thing that I'm trying to consider how to really evaluate is where do we put the, how do I want to say it, the gate a little bit further down the road as far as moving some of that initial assessment to enter the seminary into a little bit farther down the road. So, that's that where, once a guy's really matured and grown through formation, they'll say, okay, now let's really take a very scrutinized look at him before candidacy or before diaconate ordination, something like that.

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS

Based on my experience with men post-ordination, our seminary's psychological evaluations adequately predict how well a man later functions as a priest
Percentage responding

	Bishops	Vocation Directors
	%	%
Do not agree	5	8
Agree a little	39	35
Agree	52	49
Strongly agree	4	8



ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

Respondents to all five surveys were asked to think of the psychological evaluations they have seen (or produced) in the past ten years and to identify the areas they feel were sufficiently covered in them. For the purposes of this study, it is most instructive to identify the areas *least* likely to be sufficiently covered among the five groups, which are:

- Severe learning disorders or disabilities compounded with lack of intellectual curiosity – 55% to 61% say it was “sufficiently included”
- Relations with self or others including relations that are so damaged or shame-based that the candidate cannot relate or assume healthy leadership – 49% to 76%
- Pervasive developmental disorders that may lead to behaviors incompatible with the human formation traits and characteristics of healthy priestly relationships and ministry - 64% to 70%
- Activity or inclination towards sexual activity with a minor or other trait that might indicate the person could be a harm to minors – 57% to 85%

FOUR OF THE FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

Bishops, vocation directors, rectors, and formators/spiritual directors were asked to write-in suggestions for how to improve the psychological evaluations. The seven most common areas for improvement mentioned across the four surveys are:

- Revisions of the testing and/or the evaluation process
- Improved assessments of the qualities needed for pastoral ministries
- Greater focus on measures of maturity and growth
- More in-depth history and cultural background assessments
- More frequent updates from seminaries about areas of concern
- Establishing universal standards for the testing, reporting, and recommendations
- More extensive testing in specific areas

ASSESSMENTS OF THE SUITABILITY OF CANDIDATES

BISHOPS & VOCATION DIRECTORS



While about **nine in 10 bishops** (92%) and vocation directors (90%) are **satisfied** that the seminaries adequately assess the suitability of men for formation or Orders

fewer

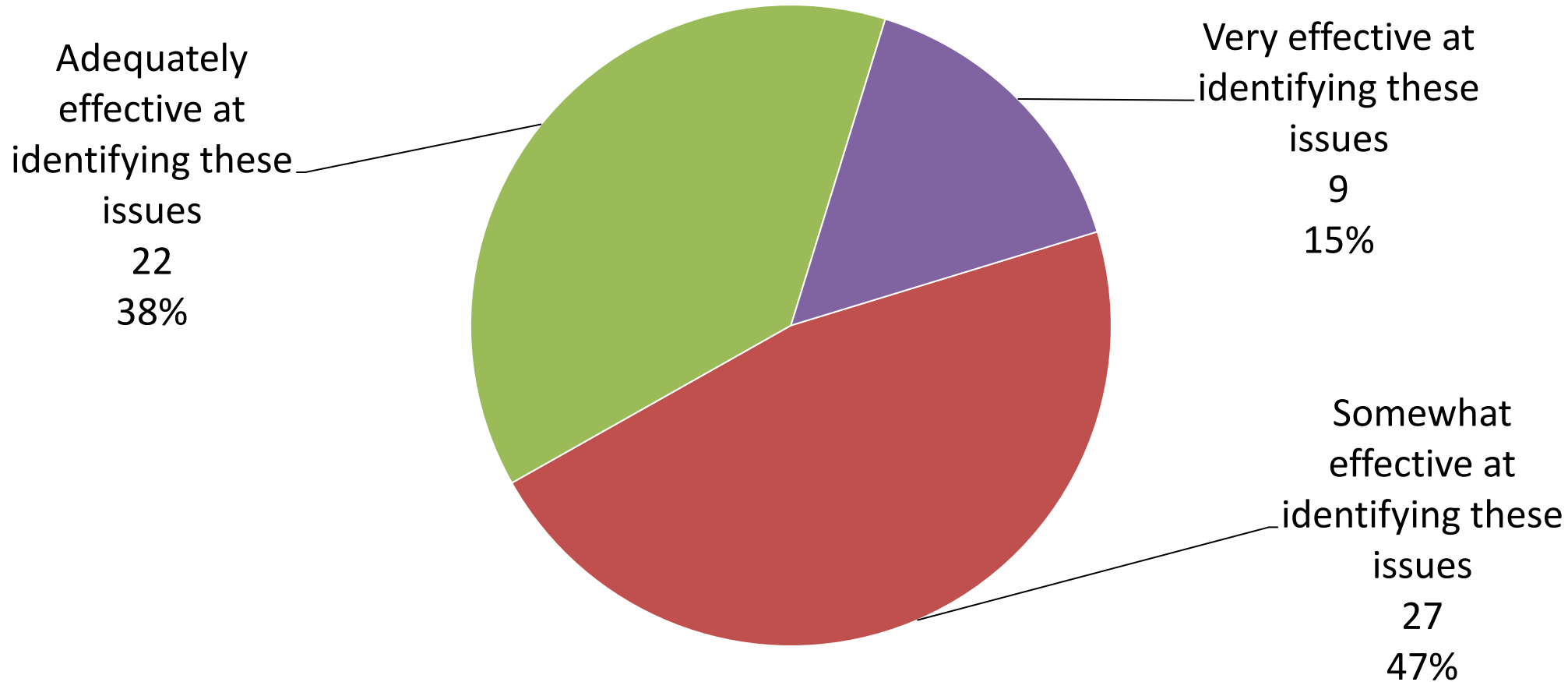


(65-68%) agree that the intermediate and final recommendations from seminaries adequately predict how well a man later functions as a priest.

MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

In your experience, how effective is the initial psychological evaluation for identifying issues related to the suitability of a candidate for formation?

Number and percentage



ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

*In my capacity, I directly ask candidates about any
same-sex attraction they have experienced*

Percentage responding

	Do Not	Somewhat		Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
	%	%	%	%
Mental health professionals	3	3	47	47
Rectors	42	19	8	31
Vocation directors	13	17	40	30
Formators and spiritual directors	25	30	29	17
Bishops	48	15	19	17

ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

I find the 2005 “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies” from the Congregation for Catholic Education to be useful when determining the suitability of candidates for Orders

	Do Not	Somewhat	Somewhat	Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
	%	%	%	%
Rectors	14	28	40	28
Formators and spiritual directors	12	26	37	26
Bishops	8	24	44	24
Vocation directors	7	37	33	24
Mental health professionals	24	39	33	3

ALL FIVE SURVEY GROUPS

All five survey groups were asked to describe how much 15 factors impacted their judgment about the suitability of a man for Orders.

Examining the factors they *most* often identify as “alone disqualifying” a man for ordination, these four are especially likely to be cited:

- A dominant attraction to those of the same sex – 43% to 60% say this is “alone disqualifying”
- Had a significant past relationship with someone of the same sex – 30% to 56%
- Cyclical semi-compulsive behaviors – e.g., unhealthy alcohol use, gambling – 20% to 42%
- After ordination, will need to remain on psychiatric medications for a more serious psychological condition – 11% to 31%

RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

I know of instances where a seminarian was previously in formation for another diocese or at another seminary program (or our own), was turned away, but was accepted by another diocese/seminary and who ultimately proved to be suitable for ordination

Percentage responding

	Do Not	Somewhat		Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
	%	%	%	%
Mental health professionals	36	26	19	19
Rectors	15	27	46	12
Formators and spiritual				
directors	26	30	31	13



RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

In our seminary, there have been men who were initially referred for counseling, but who ultimately ended up receiving little or none at all

Percentage responding

	Do Not	Somewhat		Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
	%	%	%	%
Mental health professionals	23	20	50	7
Rectors	46	27	27	0
Formators and spiritual				
directors	59	24	14	3



RECTORS, FORMATORS & MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

We have advanced men to ordination in the past five years who have had serious issues that were not adequately recognized by our formation team’s evaluative measures

Percentage responding

	Do Not	Somewhat		Strongly
	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
	%	%	%	%
Mental health professionals	17	29	40	14
Rectors	60	16	20	4
Formators and spiritual				
directors	52	23	20	5



FINAL THOUGHTS & TAKE-AWAYS

INTEREST IN THE TOPIC & IN BEST PRACTICES

- All of those interacted with during the study - either by survey, email or by interview - realize the importance of the topic and seem genuinely interested in seeing improvement in this area
- The respondents and interviewees recognize the necessary messiness of assessing the suitability of men. I found a real humility among the interviewees in how they struggle to make the right decisions
- Disseminating some best practices would address many of these issues

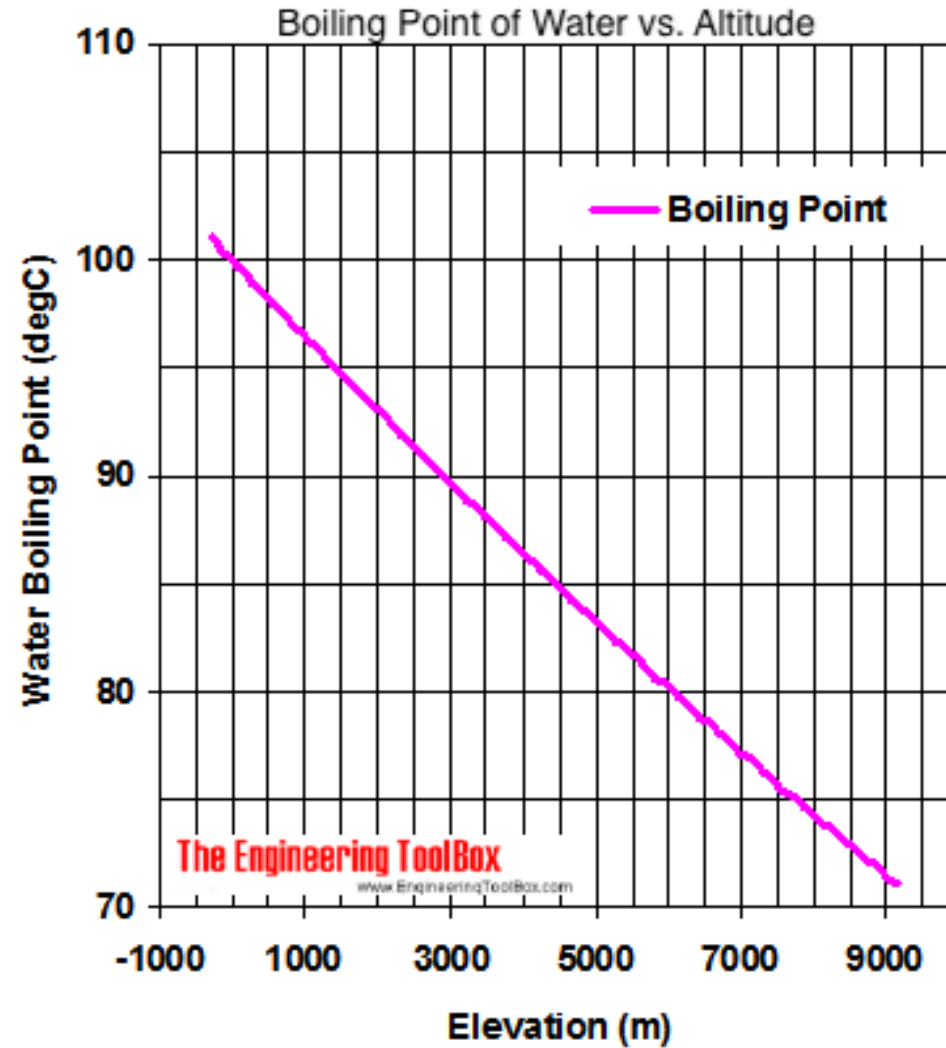
TAKE-AWAYS – MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

- The current varying quality of the initial psychological evaluations really seems to affect the whole process. Having a sample of an ideal psychological evaluation to share with the MHPs who do evaluations would likely help improve their quality
- An effective way to allow MHPs to be more involved in formation team meetings while still providing counseling is to have two men in separate roles, one doing counseling and one involved more at the bird's eye level
- In any case, having those MHPs working with seminaries talk more with the diocesan and seminary personnel seems wise indeed

THE MESSINESS BUILT INTO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

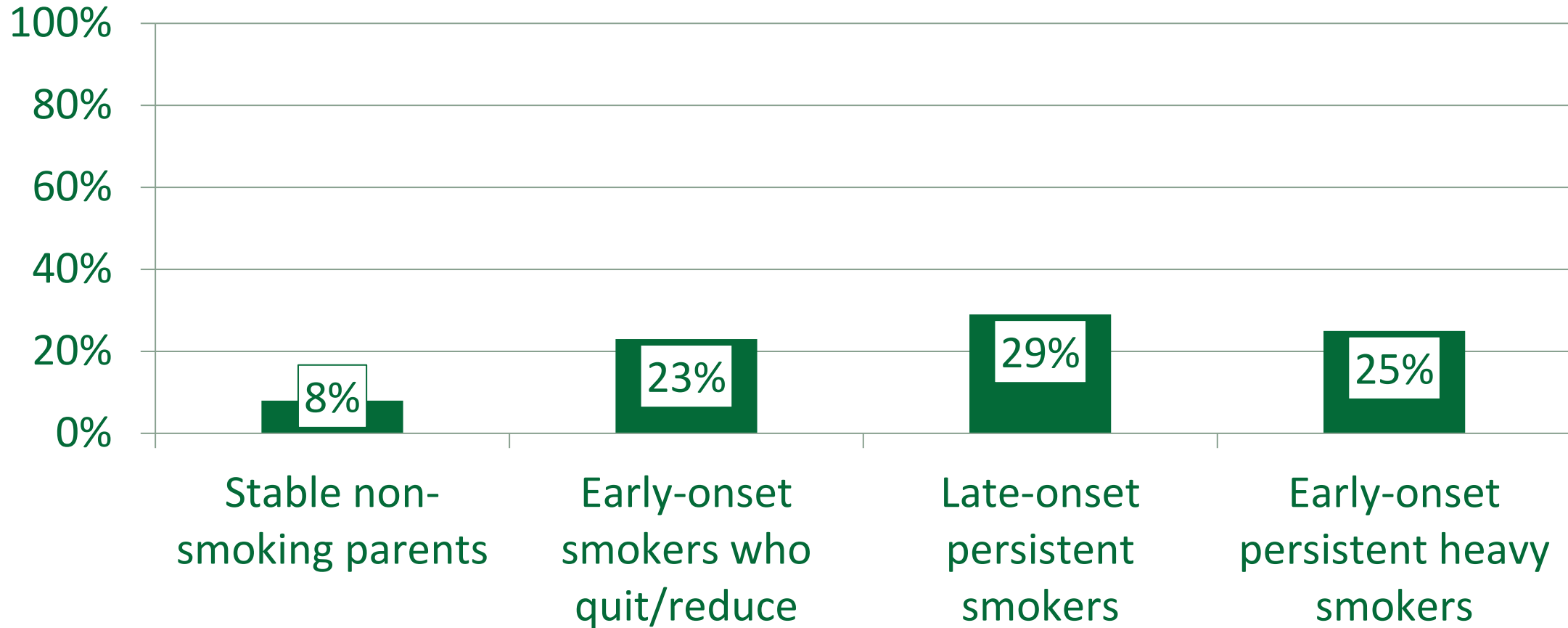
- Predictions and forecasting are important parts of both the sciences and the social sciences
- The sciences can predict something like the time of a sunrise or a sunset with amazing accuracy.
- The social sciences are better at predicting proportions.
- Let me give an example

THE MESSINESS BUILT INTO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES



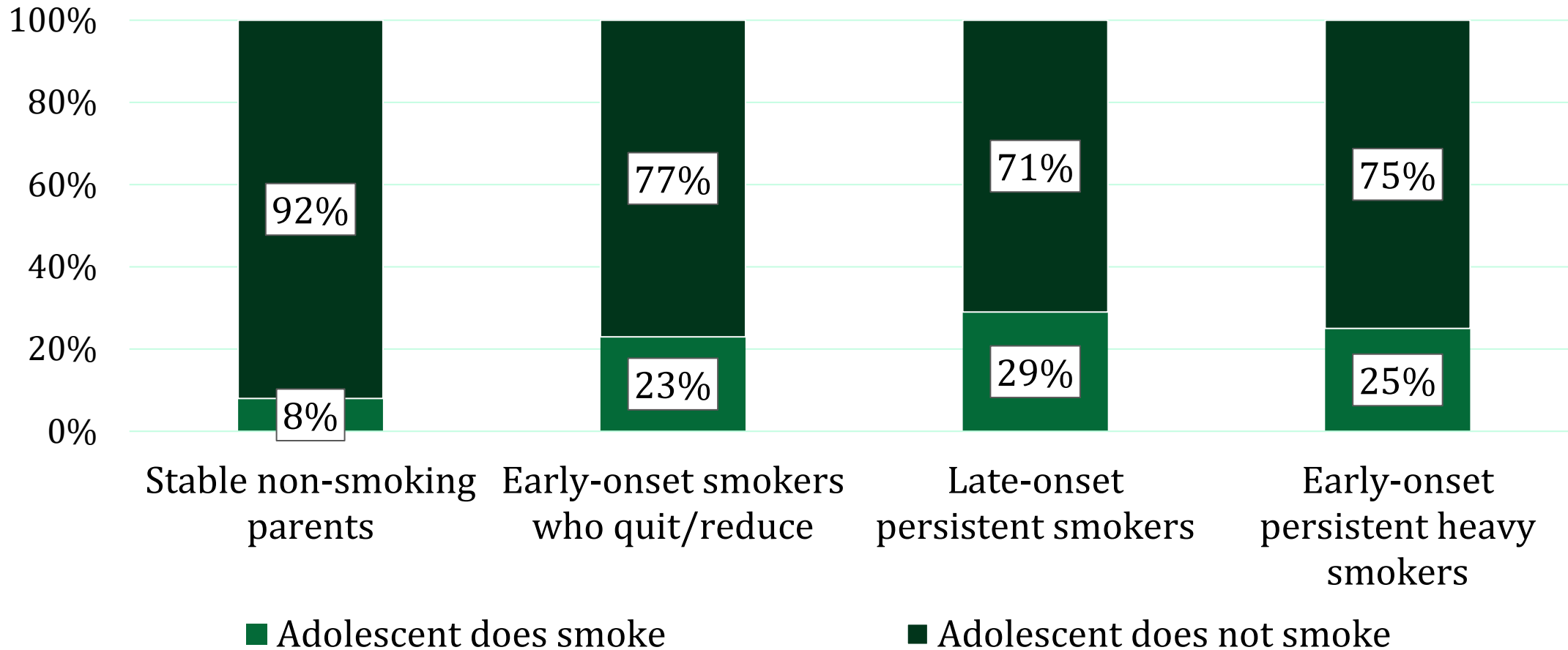
FORECASTING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

**Percentages of Adolescents (Ages 11 & Older] Smoking,
by the Parents' Smoking History & Current Usage**



FORECASTING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

**Percentages of Adolescents (Ages 11 & Older) Smoking,
by the Parents' Smoking History & Current Usage**



SOCIAL SCIENCE STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

- When mental health professionals administer a battery of tests to identify areas for attention for formation, you have every reason to have great confidence in their results.
- Ditto for the interventions they recommend – they are solid.
- Forecasting, however, is much more difficult to do on the individual level. The social sciences are fantastic at predicting how many in a group will exhibit a behavior, but not at pinpointing which individual will do what.
- So you can do everything right to prevent something, but still not have the outcome you desire. That variability is built right into the system.

<https://cara.georgetown.edu/books-and-other-publications>

THANK YOU!