

Frequently Asked Questions About Accreditation

INFORMATION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

What is The Association of Theological Schools (ATS)?

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) began as a conference of theological schools in 1918. In 1936, it became an association, adopted standards for judging quality, and in 1938 established its first list of accredited schools. Its membership currently includes 238 accredited members, 10 institutions with candidate for accredited status, and 13 associate member institutions. Its member schools include Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox graduate schools of theology that reflect a broad spectrum of doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and theological perspectives within the Christian faith. The mission of ATS is to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.

What is the ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA)?

The ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA) is recognized to do its work by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a non-governmental agency. Federal recognition involves rigorous documentation of compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, onsite inspections and observation of accreditation processes, and a public hearing conducted by a national citizens review panel. The Commission received renewal of recognition by the USDOE through 2011. CHEA is the national policy center and clearinghouse on accreditation within U.S. higher education.

The Board of Commissioners, which is composed of representatives from member schools and from the public, has two primary duties: (1) compilation and maintenance of the list of schools accredited in accordance with the standards determined by the Commission, including the authority to add schools to the list and (2) the undertaking, on an ongoing basis, of a review of accredited schools for continued inclusion on the list of accredited schools including all aspects of accreditation pursuant to the procedures and standards of the Commission.

The Commission *accredits institutions* and *approves degree programs* offered by accredited schools. Notations are imposed by the Board of Commissioners in order to identify how and when, in the judgment of the Board, principles contained in the accrediting standards are not being adequately translated into practice by an institution.

What is accreditation and why is it necessary?

Accreditation is a voluntary activity in which institutions hold themselves accountable to agreed-upon standards of institutional and educational quality, and to degree-program content, format, and resources that meet or exceed certain established standards. The three elements of accreditation include voluntary participation, self-study, and peer review. Institutions seeking to obtain or renew accreditation must conduct a comprehensive analysis

involving input from all constituencies and resulting in both an assessment of quality in reference to common standards and in recommendations for improvement. An evaluation committee composed of peers from member institutions reviews the self-study report, verifies the institution's demonstrations of quality and integrity, and offers recommendations concerning compliance, improvement, and accreditation. The Board of Commissioners reviews the committee's recommendations and renders a decision concerning the institution's accredited status using the findings of the evaluation committee, along with the institution's self-study and its response to the evaluation committee's recommendations.

In order to participate in the federal student loan program, an institution must be accredited by an agency that is recognized by the USDOE. Likewise, other federal programs, such as the U.S. military chaplaincy, require a degree from a seminary accredited by an agency that is recognized by the USDOE. Major U.S. denominations also have requirements concerning the accredited status of schools attended by denominational candidates for ordination.

Does the Commission on Accrediting accredit Bible colleges?

The scope of recognition that the Commission has from the USDOE does not include undergraduate level programs; therefore, the Commission does not accredit Bible colleges. One accrediting agency for Bible colleges is the Association for Biblical Higher Education, whose website is www.abhe.org.

What kinds of programs does the Commission on Accrediting approve?

The Commission approves, separately, each post-baccalaureate professional theological program (master's and doctoral levels) offered by member institutions. It does not accredit schools with undergraduate programs.

Are there accrediting agencies for seminaries other than the Commission on Accrediting?

There are six regional accrediting agencies that are recognized by the USDOE. These regional agencies accredit higher education institutions of all types within a given geographic region. They include Middle States Commission on Higher Education (www.msche.org), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (www.neasc.org), the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org), Commission on Colleges and Universities of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (www.nwccu.org), Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (www.sacscoc.org), and the Senior Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (www.wascweb.org).

The Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (www.tracs.org) is another accrediting agency recognized by the USDOE and CHEA.

How do I find out if a seminary is accredited by the ATS Commission on Accrediting?

Click on [Member Schools](#) where you will find an alphabetical, geographical, and denominational list of member institutions. Each school's listing indicates its membership category: accredited or candidate for accreditation. Associate member schools are members

of ATS and not the Commission because they have not yet initiated the accreditation process. Links are provided to websites for each of these member schools.

Can I earn a degree online?

The Commission's accrediting standards do not permit earning a degree entirely through online courses. There is a minimum of a one-year residency requirement for Master of Arts (MA) programs and the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program. This one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent must be earned on the campus of the institution granting the degree or on an extension site of the institution that has been approved for degree-granting status. Currently, no credits may be obtained online for research doctoral degrees (PhD and ThD).

Will Commission accreditation guarantee that my credits will transfer?

It is an institution's prerogative whether to accept transfer credits. The Commission on Accrediting encourages, but does not require, the acceptance of credits from another institution. This institution should be accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). If an institution does accept transfer credits, it should ensure that courses in which the credits were earned were eligible for graduate credit in the institution at which they were taken. Not more, however, than half of the credits required for the other degree may be transferred into a COA-approved degree program, and not more than half of the credits required by a COA-approved degree may be granted on the basis of transfer credits.

I have a degree from a foreign country. Would it be accepted at a U.S. or Canadian institution?

Degrees obtained outside the United States or Canada need to be equivalent to those earned in the United States or Canada. The admissions or registrar's office of the institution to which you are seeking admission would have to evaluate and determine the equivalency of the foreign degree.

What should I do if I have a complaint against a member institution?

The Commission has a policy regarding complaints against member schools. Click on the link under [Commission on Accrediting > Procedures](#) (XI Complaints). Please note that complaints must be filed in writing and must provide evidence that the member school is in violation of a stated policy or accrediting standard or a membership criterion.

Does the Commission on Accrediting provide a qualitative ranking of its member schools?

The Commission does not provide a qualitative ranking of its member schools. To be accredited means that a theological school is judged to have resources appropriate to its purposes and educational programs; that its degree programs meet agreed-upon conventions of admission, content, requirements, and duration; and that it is able to demonstrate the extent to which its educational and institutional goals are being achieved.

How can I determine if a school is right for me?

You should start by reviewing the institution's website, calling or writing the admissions office for an information packet, seeking out current and former students of the school, speaking with your pastor or priest, and visiting the institution.