

Handbook of Accreditation

Section One

An Introduction to Accreditation
by the Commission on Accrediting
of the Association of Theological Schools



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

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The Handbook of Accreditation
of the Commission on Accrediting
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In July 2005, the accrediting work of The Association of Theological Schools was transferred to a newly incorporated entity, the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools. The standards and procedures remained the same, and all of the accredited and candidate status member schools of the original ATS became Members of the Commission on Accrediting of ATS as well.

An Introduction to Accreditation by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools

Accreditation is a primary means of quality assurance in North American higher education. This section of the *Handbook of Accreditation* introduces the accreditation of theological schools by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools (“Commission”) through brief descriptions of the meaning, purposes, characteristics, and benefits of Commission accreditation. While each of these descriptions merits further elaboration, their combination provides an appropriate introduction.

Accreditation is a practice that originated with institutions of higher education in North America. Historically, accreditation has been a voluntary activity in which institutions hold themselves mutually accountable to agreed-upon standards of educational quality. To do this, schools form an accrediting body and adopt a set of standards and procedures for evaluating the educational quality of schools accredited by that body. Each school is evaluated according to the standards in a three-part process: (1) the school evaluates itself by conducting a self-study; (2) a committee of peers from other accredited institutions visits the school to evaluate the institution and, on the basis of its findings, prepares a narrative report with recommendations to the accrediting body; (3) the accrediting body considers reports from the various accreditation committees and, in the context of the formally adopted standards, makes decisions about the accredited status of the schools. Accreditation, at its most basic level, is the practice of engaging these activities as a means by which autonomous institutions hold themselves and each other accountable to mutual understandings of educational and institutional quality.

The Meaning of Commission Accreditation

The meaning of accreditation, while it has varied over time, has always been associated with judgments about quality. Accreditation is granted by agencies, like the Commission, that are entirely non-governmental and cannot confer any legal status on schools. Theological schools in the United States and Canada derive legal authority by state or provincial action to conduct their corporate business, deliver educational programs, and grant degrees. Such governmental actions, however, imply no judgment about the overall quality of an institution. The assessment of institutional and educational quality has been the work of accrediting agencies, and the most technical meaning of “accredited” is that an accrediting agency has judged a school to function according to its standards of quality.

As accrediting standards evolve, the meaning of “accredited” as a status granted to a higher education institution changes. The underlying meaning of accreditation has taken three forms since the organization began to function as an accrediting agency in the 1930s. Each of these forms has introduced new expectations while maintaining the basis of the previous ones.

In its first standards, The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS), along with most other North American higher education accrediting agencies before World War II, evaluated schools in terms of their resources. Indicators of adequate resources included appropriate library resources, facilities, and faculties appropriate in skill and knowledge for theological education. To be accredited, during this era, meant that a theological school was judged to have the resources considered necessary and appropriate for a post-baccalaureate theological institution.

A second movement, one that emerged in the second half of the century, reflected the changed reality of theological schools comprising the Association. Until the 1960s, most schools ac-

credited by ATS had a similar purpose: offering the Bachelor of Divinity degree for persons (almost exclusively men) preparing for ordination in Protestant denominations in the United States and Canada. By the 1970s, however, the purposes of ATS schools began to change as Roman Catholic and Evangelical Protestant schools sought accreditation, as degree programs multiplied, and as student bodies became more diverse. The result was a movement in ATS accreditation in which the question about resources was asked in the context of the school's purposes, degree programs, and student body, and new questions were asked about the educational distinctiveness of differing degree programs. To be accredited, during this second movement in ATS accreditation, meant that a theological school was judged to have resources appropriate to its educational and institutional purpose, *and* that its educational programs met agreed-upon conventions about admission, content, requirements, and duration.

The most recently redeveloped ATS standards, which the Commission received, reflect a third movement by modifying earlier questions and adding important new ones. The redeveloped standards, like the standards of other higher education accrediting bodies, emphasize the importance of institutional and educational effectiveness. As a result, Commission accreditation poses a new question while continuing forms of many of the older ones: "Is the school achieving its purpose? Is it accomplishing its institutional and educational goals?" To be accredited, according to current Commission standards, 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.

Each of these meanings of accreditation has been based on standards adopted by the community of theological schools, thus reflecting a social construction of quality in graduate, professional

theological education. The perception of quality contained in the 1996 standards is not the only perception of quality, but it is the only one that has been constructed by a collaborative process, across a wide range of schools that relate to a broad range of religious communities, at a particular historical moment. It is a perception of quality that is faithful to the theological character of theological schools, congruent with preceding understandings of quality among the member schools, appropriate to the broader context of higher education, and sensitive to educational needs of religious communities in North America.

The Purposes of Commission Accreditation

Accreditation has generally served two purposes in twentieth-century higher education. The first is to ensure that institutions of higher education function according to *standards of institutional and educational quality*. Whatever the definition of quality contained in accrediting standards, the processes of accreditation have sought to ensure that, at the very least, some acceptable level of these standards of quality is present in an accredited institution. During this century, the understanding of “acceptable level” has continued to escalate, so that accrediting standards are more rigorous and sophisticated now than they were earlier in the century. The second purpose of accreditation is the *improvement* of institutions and their educational programs. Institutions that have clearly met basic standards of quality should improve, both institutionally and educationally, and accreditation is a process that encourages that improvement. Accreditation has other purposes, but these two are the most common across accrediting agencies, and they figure significantly in the Commission’s approach to accreditation.

The Commission seeks to accomplish these general purposes of accreditation for a particular group of institutions: theological schools in the United States and Canada that are within the Christian or Jewish traditions and conduct post-baccalaureate degree programs of education for religious leadership and scholarship

in the theological disciplines. Theological education takes many forms in North America—from efforts in congregations and urban training centers to baccalaureate-level education for ministry. These are all viable forms of theological education needed by the church and religious communities. The purpose of Commission accreditation, however, is to make judgments about the segment of theological education comprising post-baccalaureate, degree-granting, educational institutions located in Canada or the United States. Commission accreditation seeks to ensure that this group of schools is functioning with appropriate quality for graduate, professional, higher education and to stimulate the improvement of these institutions.

Characteristics of Commission Accreditation

The activities of accreditation have a variety of characteristics, and several deserve additional comment, including agreed-upon standards and procedures, the process of institutional self-evaluation, the process of peer review, and the work of the Board of Commissioners (“Board”).

Standards and Procedures

Commission accreditation is based on standards and procedures that have been adopted by the Commission’s membership. The standards are published as Part 1 of the *Bulletin*.

The Commission standards consist of two major parts. The first part includes standards related to institutional and educational resources and processes, and includes sections on purpose, integrity, theological scholarship, the theological curriculum, governance, faculty, students, finances, library resources, and extension education. The second part has a standard for each type of degree program offered by accredited schools. These degree program standards establish a common economy for graduate theological degrees and define an agreed-upon understanding of their con-

tent, duration, location, and requirements. The Board *accredits* an institution on the basis of the standards as a whole and *approves* each of the degree programs it offers on the basis of the degree program standards. The *Handbook of Accreditation* provides guidance about the use and interpretation of the Commission standards in Section Five, “Using the Commission Standards of Accreditation in Institutional Evaluation.”

Institutional Self-Evaluation

The Commission standards have a normative function in theological education in that they embody a definition of quality that has been established by the broader community of theological schools. While the standards provide room for more than one perception of quality, they constitute a normative reference for an accredited institution’s self-evaluation, the evaluation work of peer review committees, and the decisions of the Board. The procedures of the Commission constitute the agreed-upon processes and conventions by which schools, accreditation committees, and the Board conduct their respective work in the accreditation process.

During the past fifty years, accreditation procedures, including Commission accreditation, have increasingly emphasized the importance of institutional self-evaluation as an important element in accreditation. Through a process of self-study, an institution engages in a sustained and serious evaluation of itself in the context of standards adopted by the wider community of theological schools. A good self-study evaluates the school’s strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness in light of the Commission standards and the institution’s purpose and goals. Institutions should use the self-study process for institutional assessment, evaluation, and planning, and prepare a report of the study that is fair, candid, and thoughtfully informative for the school and the peer review committee. The *Handbook* provides comprehensive guidance about the self-study process in Section Two, “Guidelines for Conducting an Institutional Self-Study.”

Peer Review

Accreditation evaluation involves a process of peer review. Individuals are chosen to evaluate an institution because of their general competence in theological education and specific areas of expertise—academics, finances, administration, library, student services, etc. They function, however, as peers from other schools. Their task is to review the school's own self-study and evaluate the institution and its educational programs in the context of the Commission accrediting standards, prepare a report and recommendations to be considered by the Board, and serve the school by helping it identify its strengths and weaknesses. Accreditation evaluation is a sensitive and serious endeavor, and responsible peer review is central to the process. Commission peer review seeks to provide an objective, knowledgeable evaluation of a school in the context of a shared commitment to quality in theological education across many schools.

As part of a peer evaluation process, members of Commission accreditation committees serve without remuneration, and accredited institutions are expected to make it possible for their faculty and administrators to serve on evaluation committees when requested. Section Four of this *Handbook* provides extensive counsel for persons serving on Commission accreditation evaluation committees, "Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees." Section Three of the *Handbook*, "Guidelines for Institutions Receiving Commission Accreditation Evaluation Committees," provides guidelines for institutional preparation and hosting of accreditation evaluation committees.

Board of Commissioners

The Board is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the Commission's list of accredited schools and implementing the accrediting standards fairly across the accredited members of the Commission. In making its decisions, the Board relies on the re-

ports of the committees that have visited schools, is bound by the procedures adopted by the Commission, and interprets and implements the Commission standards of accreditation. The Board consists of twelve to sixteen members (80 percent from accredited institutions and 20 percent public members—persons unrelated to Commission schools in either employee, student, or board capacities) who are elected by the members of the Commission. The Commission Bylaws give full power to the Board to make all accreditation decisions, subject only to the formally adopted process of appeals. No other entity in ATS or the Commission has influence on the decisions made by the Board.

The Commission contracts with the Association for senior and support personnel to work on its behalf. Staff provide consultation to the schools about accrediting issues, conduct workshops and Board-mandated staff visits to schools, maintain the accreditation visit schedule, appoint evaluation committee members, provide on-site support to committees during evaluation visits, prepare the agenda for the Board meetings, maintain its records, and in other appropriate ways, support the work of the Board.

Benefits of Commission Accreditation

Because the purposes of Commission accreditation are to ensure standards of quality and to facilitate the improvement of theological schools, the benefits of accreditation accrue from the attainment of these purposes. These benefits, however, are experienced in different ways—by the institutions, their internal constituencies, and their external constituencies.

Institutions

The primary benefit to institutions is accreditation's impetus toward improvement. Improvement may occur as a consequence of schools' efforts to meet Commission institutional and degree program standards, by the assessment of external peer reviewers, or

by the judgment about institutional strengths and areas of needed growth reflected in Board decisions. Many schools, for example, complete their self-study and perceive that the process itself resulted in significant improvement for the school, quite apart from the visiting committee's findings or the Board's actions. Other schools have noted that committee evaluations or Board actions have provided an impetus for institutional improvement by helping the school focus on and give priority to issues of concern or by providing an external requirement to address areas the school knew it needed to address, but that internal conditions had kept it from doing.

Institutions also benefit from their accreditation when other agencies or institutions make judgments about a school on the basis of its accredited status. For example, because the United States Department of Education recognizes the Commission on Accrediting of ATS, Commission accreditation fulfills one of the Department's requirements for institutional eligibility for student participation in federally guaranteed student loan programs. In Canada, some provincial entities have used Commission accreditation as a factor in decisions about the acceptability of degrees individuals have earned from theological institutions in other provinces. Accreditation thus provides an external assessment of the quality of the school and its educational programs, which other institutions and agencies then accept.

*Internal Constituencies:
Students, Faculty, and Administration*

Students benefit from their school's accreditation. Work completed at accredited schools is more easily transferred to other institutions—although acceptance of transfer credit is always the decision of individual institutions. A degree from a Commission-accredited theological school is recommended or required for ordination in many denominations, recognition by certain professional associations, and employment in some contexts. Accreditation

makes possible forms of public recognition of the academic work students have completed. Students also benefit by Commission standards that require institutions to administer student financial support in appropriate ways, to provide appropriate services to students, and to adopt and follow patterns of procedural fairness in decisions about students. Finally, students benefit from an accreditation process that ensures the academic and professional integrity of the degrees they earn. While this may mean more or harder work to earn the degree, it ensures students that their work exposes them to the disciplines and practices recognized as important for theological study.

Faculty do much of the work accreditation requires of institutions, especially the self-study, but they, too, receive benefits. The Commission standards support the central role of faculty in theological education, articulate the freedom of inquiry necessary for good scholarship, and provide guidance for many of the educational and professional roles faculty assume. As the standards provide an impetus for institutional improvement, theological schools become better places to teach, learn, and conduct research. Accreditation also serves administrators, particularly as it provides guidance to a wide range of institutional functions, supports appropriate and fair patterns of governance, and offers an external pattern of review that can help a school understand what it does well and where it needs to improve.

External Constituencies:

Denominations, Financial Supporters, and the Public

Accreditation benefits the denominations and other constituencies that support theological schools. It provides an external review of institutions that, in turn, can help supporting constituencies determine how others judge the quality of “their” school. It also provides a normative standard for degrees across theological schools. A denomination or congregation, for example, can assume that an MDiv earned from any Commission-accredited school reflects

common expectations of educational achievement and curricular exposure to the disciplines of theological and ministerial studies. Still another benefit to external constituencies is the exposure accreditation provides to agreed-upon patterns of good practice. Most Commission standards have developed over time as schools have struggled with difficulties, observed their successes, and learned from their mistakes. Commission standards thus reflect a kind of accrued wisdom about resources and institutional practices necessary for good theological education.

Financial supporters of Commission schools can benefit from accreditation in a way similar to their benefit from financial auditing. The function of accreditation, while it is not an audit, is to provide an external, independent judgment about the strengths and weaknesses of an institution and to encourage wise use of its resources and careful attention to its mission. These forms of accountability ensure financial supporters that the institution is engaged in appropriate educational efforts and that those efforts conform to normative expectations of quality. Accreditation also benefits a wider public, which is often uninformed about theological schools. It provides assurance that the schools in their communities are responsible citizens in the higher education community.

Because accreditation seeks to benefit institutions, and both their internal and external constituencies, it cannot serve as the special advocate on behalf of any one of these beneficiaries. The primary focus of accreditation is on a common good; theological schools exist for the sake of religious communities and the society as a whole.

The Broader Accrediting Community in Higher Education

The Commission is one of many agencies involved in the accreditation of higher education.

Some of these accreditors, like the Commission, accredit entire institutions. In the United States, the dominant institutional accrediting bodies are the six regional associations, each accrediting a wide range of post-secondary degree-granting institutions in its geographic area. Virtually every college, university, and community college, as well as a broad range of special-purpose institutions, is accredited by the regional association in whose geographic boundaries the institution is located. Approximately 80 percent of Commission-accredited schools in the United States are also accredited by a regional accrediting body.

Other accreditors accredit professional or programmatic areas of study undertaken in larger institutions. Social work, medicine, law, teacher education, allied health, counseling, and many other areas of study in preparation for professional practice have their own specialized accrediting bodies. When the Commission accredits a university-related divinity school or a college-related seminary, it functions as a professional accreditor for the theological school.

In both cases, the Commission coordinates its accreditation work, including the self-studies schools prepare, the appointment of accreditation evaluation committees, and the preparation of committee reports, with the regional agencies. This eliminates the duplication of work for freestanding schools that seek dual accreditation or college/university-related theological schools that seek Commission accreditation.

Accreditation is not a totally regulated industry. Because accrediting bodies are founded by the schools they accredit, a few schools could form an accrediting association, with standards that do not address quality, and claim an “accredited” status. In reality, this has happened frequently. There are quality controls for accrediting agencies, which are obtained in three ways. The first is the responsibility of the schools to adopt standards that are fair and rigorous—to hold themselves accountable to a high standard of quality. The second is for the accrediting agency to seek the recognition of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). This Washington-based, non-governmental agency recognizes accrediting agencies that demonstrate that their accreditation supports quality in higher education, contributes to improvement in higher education, provides public information and quality assurance about higher education, and functions with skill and integrity as an accreditation agency. CHEA recognition is limited to agencies that accredit degree-granting higher education institutions or programs within such institutions. The third quality control is recognition by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The Department of Education reviews agencies by a variety of criteria to determine whether the accreditation provided by an accrediting body is sufficiently rigorous and appropriate to warrant the Department of Education to certify an institution eligible for its students to receive guaranteed federal loans. This certification can be extended to institutions in the United States or Canada, if they desire to participate in these federal programs for U.S. citizens.

The Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools is recognized by both the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the U.S. Secretary of Education.

