



An Introduction for New Evaluators

The purpose of this material is to prepare new evaluators for effective and informed participation in the on-site review of ATS Commission member schools in the accreditation process. This material is organized under five headings as follows:

- Section 1: Why me?
- Section 2: What do I have to know?
- Section 3: What do I have to do **before** the evaluation?
- Section 4: What do I have to do **during** the evaluation?
- Section 5: What do I have to do **after** the evaluation?

Nomenclature: In keeping with general practice, the terms visit, visitor, and the like have been updated to evaluation, evaluator, and so forth.

Section 1: Why me?

How did you find me?

The staff members of the ATS Commission maintain a database of evaluators (visitors) and prospective evaluators from which they identify possible evaluation (visiting) committee members. Senior administrative officers at ATS Commission schools recommend additions to the database, and staff members make additions based on personal observation on evaluation visits.

Am I special?

Absolutely. The person or persons who commended you to the ATS Commission staff observed that you have the particular set of skills and capacities required of ATS Commission evaluators.

What are some of those particular skills and capacities that good evaluators bring to the task?

There is a careful balance between being informed and being aligned that distinguishes good accrediting evaluators—distinguishes them, that is, from consultants, coaches, teachers, advisors, trainers, and so forth. This distinction is related to the fact that this particular activity is about the structure and implementation of theological education rather than about the specific, theological content of mission statements, doctrinal positions, courses, reading assignments, and papers. The focus on structure and implementation rather than on content also enables the ATS Commission to exist as the broadly based association of schools of theological education that it is.

The accreditation evaluator is, therefore, more than an interested observer and less than a consultant. The function of the evaluator is, by virtue of reading the self-study, of conversing with faculty members, administrative officers, board members, staff, and students, and of looking over the shoulders of others to become sufficiently attuned to the distinctive features of the institution whereby the evaluator is then able to walk in the shoes of the institutional inhabitants and to observe where, in terms of the institution’s own mission, vision, strategic plan, and outcomes, the institution is doing well and where it is doing less well.

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At least two assumptions behind “doing well” are that the institution is working within the framework of the ATS Commission standards and procedures and that the institution shares with other ATS Commission member schools an intention that its degree programs and operations are congruent with the standards and procedures. More about what you need to know of the standards and procedures comes later.

How much time will this work require?

Self-studies for comprehensive evaluations are normally between 125 and 200 pages in length. There will be, in addition, an assortment of appendices, handbooks, catalogs, and audit statements. Prior to the evaluation, the good evaluator will likely read the self-study through twice, with additional attention to the areas of assigned responsibility. Such areas would typically involve three (out of ten) General Institutional Standards and one or two Degree Program Standards. Comprehensive evaluations normally begin on Monday afternoon and are completed by noon

on Thursday.

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Evaluation sites could be anywhere in the United States and Canada,

and occasionally outside North America. One or two committee members may also spend a day at each extension site, if any, where the institution offers a substantial portion of a degree program. During or following the evaluation, each evaluator drafts a portion of the report reflecting the assigned standards and degree programs. A complete committee report is commonly 17–21 pages. The total time includes pre-evaluation preparation, travel, intense on-site activities, and post-evaluation writing.

What should I expect to get out of serving as an evaluator (i.e., What's in it for me?)

If the estimates in the foregoing paragraphs sound like a lot of work, it is because they are. On the other hand, accreditation evaluation visits are a unique opportunity to see, up close and immediate, the work of another institution. It is an unparalleled invitation to professional development. No evaluator has ever said, "Don't ask me again; I don't have time for this." Most who are unable to accept an invitation express genuine disappointment.

Section 2: What do I have to know?

The ATS Commission is a voluntary membership association. Member schools have agreed to develop and manage their affairs within the framework of standards and procedures. The members adopt and, when necessary, amend the standards and procedures. Every ten years, member schools review their own work through the lens of the general and specific requirements of the standards and procedures. They summarize the process and results in self-study, and a small committee of peers, such as you,

comes to review the school, based on the self-study and on-site discussions and analysis of the documents presented by the school.

The ATS Commission has produced a *Handbook of Accreditation*,¹ which offers an extensive description of the accrediting process and guidance for schools preparing self-studies. Note *Section Four*,² "Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Committees," especially the first five pages, which cover the qualifications, appointment, and expectations of evaluation committee members.

What are the ATS Commission standards?

Member schools adopt procedures and General Institutional Standards that set out the mandatory requirements, normative expectations, and descriptions of quality that characterize an accredited institution. In addition, there are fourteen Degree Program Standards of which twelve apply to specific degree programs, one applies to all degree programs, and one is a procedural standard. Evaluators should have a general familiarity with the structure and contents of the standards. At this point the standards are under revision. The membership adopted revisions to the first nine General Institutional Standards and Commission procedures in June 2010. Recommendations for action on Standard 10 and the Degree Program Standards will be presented at the June 2012 Biennial Meeting. This module bases its work on the standards and procedures currently in place although member schools receiving a comprehensive accreditation visit up to June 1, 2011, may choose either the current General Institutional Standards or the redeveloped General Institutional Standards as the criteria by which they would prefer to be evaluated.

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What is a self-study?

The *self-study*³ is just that, and schools have considerable freedom in the way they organize the self-study process and its result. The self-study should reflect a collegial undertaking that has involved all of the subcommunities

of the institution (e.g., students, faculty, administrators, governing board members, etc.).

The primary purpose of the self-study

The primary purpose of the self-study is the self-development of the school, confirming its strengths and identifying points, through the lens of the standards, where it falls short of its own goals and missional commitments. An important, although secondary, purpose is to undergird the evaluation committee's work of analysis. Schools may organize the self-study in the way that best supports that primary purpose. Most schools find that a self-study that reflects the organization of the standards serves both the primary purpose as well as the secondary purpose.

Section 3: What do I have to do before the evaluation?

The following is a list of events and actions associated with a comprehensive evaluation and the work of the Board of Commissioners as outlined in [Section Three](#)⁴ of the *Handbook of Accreditation*, "Guidelines for Institutions Receiving Accreditation Evaluation Committees." Also refer to [Section Four](#),⁵ "Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Committees," especially pages 5–18.

Timeline

One year prior to the evaluation. The school and the ATS Commission liaison set the date of evaluation approximately one year in advance. The school makes hotel reservations for the committee members (separate rooms for each member), which are direct-billed to the institution. The self-study committee completes the draft, which the faculty, administrative officers, and other appropriate members of the school community review before final action by the governing board.

Four to six weeks prior to the evaluation. You will receive directly from the school a copy of the self-study and additional documents (e.g., a catalog; student, faculty, and governing board handbooks; the most recent external audit; etc.). You will receive from the ATS Commission office a copy of the previous comprehensive evaluation report, the action letter communicating the decisions of the Board of Commissioners based on the recommendations of the evaluation committee, and the accreditation history of the school.

Begin by reading the report on the previous comprehensive evaluation. It is much shorter, of course, than the self-study, and it serves as a good orientation to the school. The accreditation history outlines interactions between the school and the Board of Commissioners. During your

reading of the self-study, look to see whether the school has attended to ensuring that the strengths identified in the previous evaluation have been sustained and that the concerns have been addressed. You will want to be especially dutiful about this with respect to any strengths and concerns that are anchored in a standard or degree program for which you are responsible.

Compare the list of approved degrees on the previous evaluation, the list of the school's approved degrees on the ATS website, the degrees identified in the self-study, and the degrees on the school's website. Inquire about any discrepancies not accounted for in the accrediting history.

Thirty to forty-five days prior to the evaluation. The committee chair works with the accreditation liaison officer (ALO) toward a tentative agenda. In consultation with the chair, the ALO arranges for the local transportation of the committee and receives any requests for additional materials identified in the committee conference call that occurs one or two weeks before the evaluation.

One to two weeks prior to the evaluation. In a conference call, committee members discuss preliminary impressions, reach a consensus on who will visit whom on-site, and identify documents or other materials that should be available to the committee during the evaluation.

What areas will I be expected to cover?

Ordinarily, the chair of the evaluation committee will invite committee members to identify standards or degree programs where they have relevant experience and expertise. The chair will also invite you to identify areas you do not feel prepared to evaluate.

Special cases: There are two areas that involve more than one standard. The mandatory requirements occur in three standards; the five overarching themes are anchored in particular standards and appear throughout the standards.

Mandatory requirements

As you might imagine, the language of the standards is heavily hortatory. [Section Five](#)⁶ of the *Handbook of Accreditation* further characterizes the language (pp. 2–5), beginning as follows:

The standards contain three different types of textual material, and each has different evaluative uses. The standards contain the following: (1) descriptions of quality in theological education, (2) statements about normative expectations of accredited schools, and (3) mandatory requirements to ensure compliance with ethical or regulatory expectations.

Eleven mandatory requirements exist within the General Institutional Standards; one appears in Standard 1, four appear in Standard 2, and the remaining six in Standard 7. You cannot count on the self-study making the point in each of these eleven instances that it is addressing one of the mandatory requirements; but it is important, if you have the responsibility for drafting the section of the report dealing with any of these particular standards, that you ensure, from the text of the self-study or from your on-site inquiries, either that the report reflects a finding that the school is meeting each of these requirements or that it recommends the appropriate corrective. There are two other federally mandated requirements, which appear in the Commission [Procedures VI.G.5 and VII.A.4](#).⁷

Five overarching themes

After the discussion of types of textual material in the standards, the *Handbook* notes that there are two organizational patterns in the standards, the first by educational and institutional life (e.g., degree programs, faculty, students, library, etc.) and the second and less obvious is by major, recurring themes woven throughout the standards, including the following:

- a priority on planning and evaluation (anchored in Standard 1, sections [1.2.2 and 1.2.3](#)),⁸
- the value of inclusion across racial/ethnic and gender lines (anchored in Standard 2, sections [2.5 and 2.6](#)),⁹
- the importance of freedom of inquiry for teaching and learning (anchored in Standard 3, section [3.3.2](#)),¹⁰
- global awareness (anchored in Standard 3, section [3.3.4](#)),¹¹ and
- the use of technology (anchored in Standard 9, section [9.8](#)).¹²

Each of these overarching themes recurs throughout the standards. The evaluation/assessment theme, for example, appears as the concluding section for Degree Program Standards A–L as well as in Standard 5, Library and information resources; Standard 6, Faculty; and so forth in addition to occupying a principal place in its “anchor standard.” If your drafting responsibility includes any of these anchor standards, you should note how both the self-study and the responses you and your colleagues receive during the on-site evaluation address the theme in the anchor standard. If the self-study does not summarize the anchor standard in the ways in which the institution carries through with each overarching theme as it appears at other points throughout the self-study, you should

confirm those points through your own review and the observations of your colleagues.

The most common problem with self-studies is that they are substantially descriptive, a narrative of the way things are at the institution at the point in time of the writing. The best self-studies reflect how the descriptive has fueled the analytical and the critical. The best self-studies also incorporate into the text both discussions of the way the institution was and how evaluative procedures already in place (best) or implemented as a result of the self-study process itself (better) led to revisions (best) or clear plans that have timelines, to develop revisions based on data from the evaluative process (better), all viewed from the perspective of the institutional mission statement.

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What are important concerns to have in mind with respect to each standard?

[Section Five](#)¹³ of the *Handbook of Accreditation* concludes with a collection of “Questions to Prompt the Accreditation Evaluation Process” (pp. 12–34). While the orientation of the questions is toward the members of the institution conducting the self-study, reviewing the applicable questions will assist your own process of critically reviewing the self-study.

General Institutional Standard 1: Purpose, planning, and evaluation

Each of these three elements has a role throughout the remaining standards and also in the Degree Program Standards.

Purpose: Does the institution have a mission statement? When was it last reviewed and reaffirmed or revised? Are the institutional and programmatic elements of the institution aligned with the mission statement?

Planning: Does the institution have a strategic plan? The most common problems with strategic plans, in addition simply to not having one or to having one that is unimplemented, are unrealistic goals, unassigned responsibilities for each element of the plan, lack of timelines for the plan, and completion dates for 90 percent of the plan in the first two years, for example, of a five-year plan.

Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation are terms that you will find used interchangeably in self-studies even though this standard subordinates assessment to evaluation, the former as an element of the latter. The first of the overarching themes occurs in Standard 1, sections 1.2.2 and 1.2.3. Section 1.2.2 summarizes the chief elements in the [evaluation/assessment](#)¹⁴ process. These elements are sufficiently critical to the self-study and evaluation processes to set them out in full:

1.2.2 Evaluation is a critical element in support of integrity to institutional planning and mission fulfillment. Evaluation is a process that includes

- (1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance;
- (2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals;
- (3) the assessment of the performance of the program, service, or person based on this information; and
- (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment. Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for institutional vitality and educational effectiveness.

The first of the mandatory requirements also occurs in Standard 1, section 1.2.2.2:

1.2.2.2 Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for educational effectiveness as required by individual Degree Program Standards.

Common issues

The ATS Commission staff members have identified the following common issues in the area of assessment programs and activities:

- Too much description and not enough analysis of effectiveness.
- Too much emphasis on institutional resources (faculty degrees, library holdings, and technological capacity) and not enough emphasis on outcomes.
- Little or no evidence of use of available ATS data resources: The Strategic Information Report; the Institutional Peer Profile Report; the Entering, Graduating, and Alumni/ae Questionnaires, and Profiles of Ministry.
- Little evidence that there is in place a process for an ongoing, regular, and sustainable review of the goals

Examples of direct measures

- *juried portfolios of student work*
- *graded capstone courses, problem-based learning activities, case study analyses*
- *feedback from denominational leaders about the effectiveness of graduates*
- *success rates on denominational ordination examinations*

Examples of indirect measures

- *surveys of student satisfaction with courses*
- *surveys of graduates related to degree program outcomes*

of the degree programs or the impression that the self-study is a decennial artifact, a portrait frozen in time rather than a frame taken from an ongoing reel of evaluative film.

In addition, staff members counsel that you should look for direct as well as indirect measures of student learning. Examples of direct measures are juried portfolios of student work; graded capstone courses, problem-based learning activities, and case study analyses; feedback from denominational leaders about the effectiveness of graduates; and success rates on denominational ordination examinations. Indirect measures include surveys of student satisfaction with courses and surveys of graduates related to degree program outcomes.

What has been learned? What has been successful? What is in need of improvement? What decisions/strategies are being taken to secure needed improvement? Closing the loop is a process of gathering data, analyzing the data, making indicated revisions, and revisiting the process.

A good assessment chapter shows how individual course objectives are aligned with degree program goals and how faculty members take time to think regularly, corporately, and systemically about these alignments and reflect on the results of this corporate thinking. The faculty should examine not only the implications of individual course evaluations but also the effectiveness of the degree program itself. Is there an annual or semiannual faculty

meeting devoted to degree program review? Is the process regular, ongoing, and sustainable?

General Institutional Standard 2: Institutional integrity

The second overarching theme—diversity as racial, ethnic, and gender inclusion¹⁵—appears in Standard 2, sections 2.5 and 2.6.

Four of the eleven mandatory requirements occur in this standard. You should confirm that the self-study includes an affirmative declaration that the school's policies and practices meet these requirements; in addition, you should confirm that the self-study includes evidence that supports the declaration.

2.2 With regard to state, provincial, and federal authorities, schools shall conduct their operations in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations.

2.3 The school shall ensure that all published materials, electronic and print, including catalogs, academic calendars, and promotional literature, accurately represent the institution to its various constituencies and publics, including students and prospective students. . . .

2.7 Institutions participating in US federal student financial assistance programs shall comply with prevailing governmental guidelines regulating these programs. . . .

2.9 Member schools shall make public a statement of their policy on transfer credits earned at other institutions of higher education, including the criteria used for their decisions.

General Institutional Standard 3: The theological curriculum: learning, teaching, and research

The third and fourth of the overarching themes—freedom of inquiry¹⁶ and global awareness and engagement¹⁷—appear in sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.4 respectively.

With respect to freedom of inquiry, if your evaluation is to a school that has a specific set of doctrinal commitments, you should ensure that the school states these commitments clearly and publicly and that it outlines in the appropriate manuals (e.g., faculty, staff, and student, how

members of the academic community exercise freedom of inquiry within the context of these commitments). Most legitimate complaints that the ATS Commission receives turn out, upon investigation, to be the result of a policy that should have been in place, but wasn't, or of ignoring a policy that was in place.

With respect to global awareness, the chief misperception is an assumption that this concept is roughly equivalent to international evangelism.

The second overarching theme, diversity, appears again in section 3.3.3, focusing at this point on diverse publics.

General Institutional Standard 4: [Reserved]

General Institutional Standard 5: Library and information resources

The standard assumes that the librarian is a full, active member of the academic community, involved in institutional strategic planning and a partner in curriculum development. The evaluator will also need to verify that the library's assessment program effectively measures not only the quantity of *resources* but also their active *use* by members of the academic community.

General Institutional Standard 6: Faculty

You will need to verify that the academic dean's office has, at a minimum, a copy of the highest degree held by each full-time faculty member. For any member of the teaching faculty who does not have a research doctorate, the file should also contain a statement outlining that faculty member's "special expertise in skill areas such as administration, music, or media as well as cross-cultural contextualization for teaching, learning, and research" (Standard 6, section 6.1.1).

Standard 6, section 6.1.8 states, "The work load of faculty members in teaching and administration shall permit adequate attention to students, to scholarly pursuits, and to other ecclesial and institutional concerns." There is a notation¹⁸ related to faculty load. Most faculty members work long hours, so the focus of the standard is not on long work hours *per se* but specifically whether, in a particular school, there is a widespread and systemic imbalance between adequate attention to students and scholarly pursuits, on the one hand, and teaching and administrative responsibilities on the other hand.

General Institutional Standard 7: Student recruitment, admission, services, and placement

The remaining six mandatory requirements occur in this standard. You should confirm that the self-study includes affirmative declarations that the school's policies and practices meet these requirements; you should also confirm that the self-study includes evidence that supports the declarations.

These are the six mandatory requirements in Standard 7:

7.1.2 In recruitment efforts, services, and publications, institutions shall accurately represent themselves as well as the vocational opportunities related to their degree programs.

7.3.1 Policies regarding students' rights and responsibilities, as well as the institution's code of discipline, shall be clearly identified and published.

7.3.4 Schools shall maintain adequate student records regarding admission materials, course work attempted and completed, and in other areas as determined by the school's policy. . . .

7.3.5 Institutions shall demonstrate that program requirements, tuition, and fees are appropriate for the degree programs they offer.

7.3.6 Institutions shall publish all requirements for degree programs, including courses, noncredit requirements, and grading and other academic policies.

7.3.8 The institution shall have a process for responding to complaints raised by students in areas related to the accrediting standards of the Commission, and schools shall maintain a record of such formal student complaints for review by the board.

General Institutional Standard 8: Authority and governance

The meeting that the committee has with the governing board usually occurs at noon on the second full day of the evaluation. This meeting is ordinarily the only one at which the work of the committee involves more than information gathering, which is the normal mode for all of its other on-campus interactions. In this meeting, the committee may also have an advocacy role for concerns that it may have developed throughout the course of interviews earlier in the evaluation, in addition to the self-study.

General Institutional Standard 9: Institutional resources

The fifth overarching theme, *technology*,¹⁹ is located in Standard 9.

An unrealistic draw on the endowment. The standard urges a 5 percent draw as indicated in the footnote for section 9.2.1.2:

A common and customary understanding of a 'prudent' use of endowment return is to budget as revenue 5 percent of a three-year average of the market value of endowment and board-designated quasi-endowment. Member schools should seek legal counsel regarding law applicable to the use of endowments.

A school that is spending at a higher rate, especially one in which the pattern is long term, needs to demonstrate what specific steps it is taking to end this self-destructive practice (i.e., Does the school have a plan? Is the plan credible? Has it been implemented?).

General Institutional Standard 10: Multiple locations and distance education

Multiple locations: One or more members of the evaluation committee will evaluate any extension site where 50 percent or more of the credits for an approved degree program may be earned. The purpose of the evaluation is to ensure that students at the extension sites receive the same or equivalent services, resources, and faculty support that benefit students on the main campus. Potential issues are excessive dependence on local adjuncts, orphan status of adjuncts or students, and inadequate availability or effective delivery of library resources.

Distance education: A key provision is found in section 10.3.3.3, "Courses shall provide sufficient interaction between teachers and learners and among learners to ensure a community of learning and to promote global awareness and sensitivity to local settings." In addition to attending to this requirement of interactivity, you should notice whether two other concerns are present: orphan status of students and inadequate availability or ineffective delivery of library resources.

Degree Program Standards

Standards DS and M of the Degree Program Standards set forth expectations relevant to all degree programs, whereas Standards A–L apply to specific degrees.

The Commission on Accrediting organizes its approved degree programs in a four-section grid: basic and advanced, and academic and professional. The lines are generally respected, with the exception of the two-year master's degree programs. The "standard" descriptions of the professional master's degree (Standard C) and the academic master's degree (Standard E) follow the pattern discussed below; there are, however, some differences in the requirements (e.g., the specialization in the professional degree and the thesis or comprehensive examination for the academic degree). There are also differences in nomenclature: The professional degree identifies the specialization with a prepositional phrase (e.g., MA in Youth Ministry), and the academic degree identifies the focus with a parenthetical phrase (e.g., MA (Biblical Studies)). These distinctions do not always make it to the local level.

Twelve of the fourteen Degree Program Standards (Standards A–L) follow the same pattern, *mutatis mutandis*, which consists of five parts, here reflecting the MDiv degree program (Standard A):

[A].1 Purpose of the degree. You should note whether the degree program has a clearly stated purpose.

[A].2 Primary goals of the program. You should note whether the school's program has stated goals (outcomes) and whether the institution's goals for the degree program are coherent with those in the degree program standard.

[A].3 Program content, location, and duration.

[A].3.1 Content: Religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.

The intention of the identification of four content areas is to ensure that each degree covers the whole spectrum of theological education, to the extent appropriate for each degree. From school to school, the curriculum will vary with respect to the proportion of each of these content areas, and the theological and doctrinal commitments of each institution will produce variation in the specific content elements in each of these four areas.

[A].3.2 Location: "In order to ensure an appropriate educational community, at least one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent shall be completed at the main campus of the school awarding the degree or at an extension site of the institution that has been approved for MDiv degree-granting status."

In recent years and in response to needs of their constituencies, schools have become unusually creative in devising nontraditional ways of enabling students to meet the residency requirements. You should review the structure of alternative tracks to ensure that there is equivalency. Schools offering distance education courses, where substantial numbers may be taken for credit, must seek approval from the Board of Commissioners when they wish to give the maximum amount of degree program credit for nonresidential courses.

[A].3.3 Duration: "In order to fulfill the broad educational and formational goals of the MDiv, the program requires a minimum of three academic years of full-time work or its equivalent."

Of late, and especially in the two-year master's degree programs, some schools have reduced the number of hours required for these degree programs. Especially when schools seek to accommodate the needs of part-time students, it becomes difficult to determine what is the equivalent of full-time work. The Board of Commissioners has adopted a guideline, which states that two-year programs "normally consist of at least 48 semester hours."

Five-part pattern of the MDiv degree program

- A.1 Purpose of the degree
- A.2 Primary goals of the program
- A.3 Program content, location, and duration
 - A.3.1 Content
 - A.3.2 Location
 - A.3.3 Duration
- A.4 Admission and resource requirements
 - A.4.1 Admission
 - A.4.2 Distinctive resources needed
- A.5 Educational evaluation
 - A.5.1
 - A.5.2

[A].4 Admission and resource requirements

[A].4.1 Admission: "As many as 10 percent of the students in the MDiv degree program may be admitted without possession of the baccalaureate degree or its educational equivalent, if the institution can demonstrate by some objective means that these persons possess the knowledge, academic skill, and ability generally associated with persons who hold the baccalaureate degree. Admission of such applicants should be restricted to persons with life experience that has prepared them for theological study at the graduate level."

The self-study should state whether the school admits any students lacking a baccalaureate degree. If the school does admit such students, you should ensure that the specified safeguards are in place. The standards used to have a so-called 20 percent rule, limiting the number of such students in any course. That provision has been eliminated, and in its place, Standard M, section M.1.4, now requires "that the course has content, requirements, and student learning outcomes appropriate to postbaccalaureate education."

[A].4.2 *Distinctive resources needed:* Faculty and community resources.

[A].5 Educational evaluation

[A].5.1 "The institution offering the MDiv shall be able to demonstrate the extent to which students have met the various goals of the degree program."

[A].5.2 "The institution shall also maintain an ongoing evaluation by which it determines the extent to which the degree program is meeting the needs of students and the institution's overall goals for the program, including measures such as the percentage of students who complete the program and the percentage of graduates who find placement appropriate to their vocational intentions."

Section 4: What do I have to do during the evaluation?

Logistics

The ATS Commission covers the evaluator's travel, lodging, and food expenses. The school sets aside a room

where the committee can meet on campus in a quiet, secure, central location with work space, beverages, light snacks, an outside telephone connection, and at least one computer with Internet access and a printer. This room is the location for all of the committee's supporting material, including the following:

- Faculty curricula vitae and degrees
- Minutes of the governing board and its committees
- Minutes of faculty and faculty committees
- Faculty, staff, and student handbooks
- Assessment material including evidence of student learning
- Strategic planning materials
- Three most recent audits and management letters
- Current year budget with year-to-date figures and projected budgets, preferably for the next three years
- Enrollment and placement trend information
- Samples of school publications (catalog, recruiting, and development)
- Authorizations to operate issued by state/provincial agencies
- Incorporation and bylaw documents.

Onsite schedule

A typical comprehensive evaluation visit will last four days and three nights and closely follows a schedule similar to the one shown on the next page.

More complex comprehensive evaluations include joint and concurrent evaluations, in which other accrediting agencies are involved. A joint evaluation, for example, may vary its handling of the exit interview and other elements of the evaluation.

Information gathering

During the interviews in which the whole committee is present (e.g., the meetings with the CEO and with the governing board), you can follow the lead of the chair and experienced evaluators. The committee will have identified beforehand the lead issues for these discussions, and if one or more of those issues fall under the standards for which you are responsible, you should prepare one or two issue-specific questions in advance.

At other times, when the interview is one-on-one, for example, with the librarian or other members of the faculty, remember that your time is limited, usually not more than twenty or thirty minutes. Although occasionally, you will encounter someone who has an ax to grind, you will find that most people you interview will speak

Onsite Schedule

Arrival day

- **Afternoon:** Committee arrives and meets around 4 p.m.
- **Early evening:** School hosts committee for dinner.

First full day

- **Early:** Committee meets (alone) with the chief executive officer.
- **Morning:** Committee members spend time, usually one-on-one, with persons responsible for various operational areas: academic, student services, development, financial, library, etc.
- **Lunch:** Possibly dine with students or alumni/ae or both.
- **Afternoon:** Committee members meet with individuals noted above, faculty, and others, eventually meeting groups of recent graduates, field supervisors, support staff, representative adjunct faculty, etc.
- **Evening:** The committee has dinner and reviews before, during, and after dinner, the day's findings.

Second full day

- **Morning:** Committee members continue interviews and document review.
- **Lunch:** Committee meets with governing board members without administrative officers (two to two-and-a-half hours).
- **Afternoon:** Committee members conduct additional interviews, usually finishing by midafternoon.
- **Evening:** Committee deliberates before or after dinner to reach a consensus on basic report contents and to formulate its recommendations.

Last day

- **Morning:** Exit interview. The committee chair communicates the actions the report will recommend to the Board of Commissioners.

candidly if you ask questions that cannot be answered in one or two words. Inquire how the institution supports their work, or how they know they are succeeding in their work. Follow up with questions addressing issues that your conversation partner raises. Remember, though, that you are there to gather information, not to problem-solve. When you reflect on the exchange afterwards, ask yourself what percentage of the time you were listening rather than speaking; your answer should exceed 85 percent.

Decision making

The committee's primary responsibility is to formulate and to substantiate a set of recommendations to the Board of Commissioners.

- Reaffirmation of accreditation, usually for ten years.
- Approval of degree programs.
- Identification of distinctive strengths and noteworthy concerns.

The articulation of the strengths and concerns is the most complex of these recommendations, in part because the report sets them out with varying levels of intensity and with different consequences. These strengths and concerns emerge in the framework of the standards, and the committee may begin the process of identifying strengths and concerns as early as the initial pre-evaluation conference call. In any case, not later than the evening review of the first full day of interviews and reading, the committee will develop a working list of strengths and concerns. The idea is to begin with a longer list, which the committee narrows through its ongoing discussions.

In the end, the committee should identify one or two distinctive strengths. What happens to the concerns depends upon the committee's sense of urgency. Some of the concerns, like some of the original strengths, will disappear from the list, either because the committee discerned that they were unfounded or because the committee judged them to be less significant. The less significant you may incorporate into the body of the text, as you complete your draft, as suggestions. Be careful of your language on these occasions because a *suggestion* in accreditation-speak connotes "a good idea . . . something you should consider," while a *recommendation* means, "This is something you must do or stop doing."

Arranging a short list of strengths and concerns: Suggestions or recommendations?

By the late afternoon or evening of the second full day of interviews and reading, the committee undertakes to arrange its short list of significant concerns, approximately

When you reflect on the exchange afterwards, ask yourself what percentage of the time you were listening rather than speaking; your answer should exceed 85 percent.

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according to the anxiety that these concerns arouse in the minds of the evaluators. Those creating the least anxiety, the committee simply pushes back into the main narrative, identifying them as suggestions.

Those concerns arousing a moderate amount of anxiety, the committee may recommend requiring that the school address and report, by a specific date, the resolution of the issue.

Those concerns arousing severe anxiety are problems that the committee judges to be points at which the school insufficiently meets one or more sections of an accrediting standard. The Board of Commissioners has developed a set of notations,²⁰ which are formal statements of deficiency by which the Commissioners require that a school demonstrate within two years that it has corrected the problem or receive “an adverse accrediting action” (i.e., loss of accreditation).

The most severe recommendation is probation, which has the same time frame for correction and the same consequences for noncorrection as a notation.

Once the committee has refined its list of strengths and concerns, it is critical that in your draft, you provide the documentation or observed basis for each concern falling in one of your assigned standards as well as the specific ATS Commission standard with which, at that point, the institution is out of alignment. Requiring reference to a standard avoids the inclusion of strongly held concerns that have no anchor in the standards. The need for you to ensure that the recommendation of a report arises from the report’s narrative is that both the Commissioners and the school are heavily dependent upon the report to spell out the background for each expressed concern and required report.

Section 5: What do I have to do after the evaluation?

It is highly desirable to depart the site with a first draft of your sections of the report completed. A review of the committee report from the previous evaluation will give you an idea of the length of your contribution, and you will note that each section includes a brief, descriptive introduction, which will orient the Commissioners to the school, inasmuch as only two of the Commissioners will have read the self-study. In any case, within a week or ten days, you must complete your writing assignment. Some chairs set shorter deadlines.

Dos and don’ts during and after the evaluation

Don’t share your good ideas, for example, about how the school’s degree program(s) or advancement office or recruitment program can be improved by emulating practices at your institution. Any time you find yourself about to begin a sentence, “Back at my place . . .” stop. While there is a temptation to view the school in light of your school’s practices, avoid it.

Don’t make other commitments (e.g., conference calls, interviews, etc.) between the time you arrive at the evaluation site and the time you leave. The evaluation isn’t 24/7, but it is 24/4.

Do remember that your work as an evaluator does not include job prospecting for yourself or your school.

Do respect the fact that you will be entrusted with highly confidential information. The downside of serving as an accreditation evaluator is the fact that many of the most interesting things you will discover cannot be discussed with anyone outside of your committee.

Do enjoy this unique opportunity for professional development.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Pages/HandbookofAccreditation.aspx>.
2. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/Handbook/Section4.pdf>.
3. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/SelfStudy/Pages/overview.aspx>.
4. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/Handbook/Section3.pdf>.
5. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/Handbook/Section4.pdf>.
6. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/Handbook/Section5.pdf>.
7. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/10COAProcedures.pdf>.
8. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standards1-2-2and1-2-3.pdf>.
9. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standards2-5and2-6.pdf>.
10. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard3-3-2.pdf>.
11. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard3-3-4.pdf>.
12. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard9-8.pdf>.
13. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/Handbook/Section5.pdf>.
14. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standards1-2-2and1-2-3.pdf>.
15. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standards2-5and2-6.pdf>.
16. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard3-3-2.pdf>.
17. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard3-3-4.pdf>.
18. The Board of Commissioners imposes a notation, usually upon the recommendation of the evaluation committee, "when it judges that an institution insufficiently meets one or more sections of an accrediting standard" (Procedures, VII.E.1).
19. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/NewEvaluators/Standard9-8.pdf>.
20. <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Documents/10COANotations.pdf>.