

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER ONE

*An Introduction to Accreditation
by the Commission on Accrediting*



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	.1
The Meaning of Commission Accreditation . . . . .	.1
The Purposes of Commission Accreditation. . . . . .	.3
The Components of Commission Accreditation . . . . .	.4
Standards and <i>Procedures</i> . . . . .	.4
Institutional Self-Evaluation. . . . .	.5
Peer Review . . . . .	.5
Board of Commissioners. . . . .	.6
The Benefits of Commission Accreditation . . . . .	.7
Institutions . . . . .	.7
Internal Constituencies: Students, Faculty, and Administration . . . . .	.8
External Constituencies: Denominations, Financial Supporters, and the Public. . . . .	.9
The Broader Accrediting Community in Higher Education	10

Introduction

Accreditation is a primary means of quality assurance in North American higher education and a significant resource for quality improvement. This chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* 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 agree on standards of educational quality and then hold themselves mutually accountable to those standards. To do this, schools form accrediting associations and, in addition to the standards, adopt procedures by which the accrediting standards are administered. 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 decision-making body; and (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 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 nongovernmental and do not have the authority to 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, do not provide any judgment about the overall quality of an institution. The assessment of institutional and educational quality has been the work of agencies like the Commission on Accrediting, and the most technical meaning of “accredited” is that an accrediting agency has evaluated a school and determined that it functions according to the standards of quality adopted by the agency.

As accrediting standards have evolved, the meaning of “accredited” has changed. In North America, the underlying meaning of

accreditation has taken three forms since the predecessor organizations of the Commission on Accrediting began accrediting theological schools in the 1930s. Each of these forms has introduced new expectations while maintaining previous ones.

In its first Standards of Accreditation, the Commission on Accrediting, along with most other North American higher education accrediting agencies before World War II, evaluated schools in terms of their resources. Accredited Member status indicated that a school had adequate library resources, facilities, and faculties appropriate in skill and education for graduate, professional theological education.

A second movement, one that emerged in the second half of the century, reflected the increasing diversity of higher education institutions, including theological schools. Until the 1960s, most theological schools 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 that ATS accreditation added a new question to its historical one about resources: Are the resources appropriate to the educational programs and goals of the institution? To be accredited, during this second movement in ATS accreditation, meant that a theological school was judged to have resources appropriate to graduate theological education *and* that its resources were appropriate for its educational programs and purposes.

Accreditation is now in a third historical moment. In addition to the evaluation of resources and assessment in terms of educational programs and goals, accrediting evaluation asks about the way in which and the extent to which the educational goals and purposes have been attained. The current Commission Standards of Accreditation, like the standards of other higher education accrediting bodies, emphasize the importance of institutional and educational effectiveness and require schools to be able to demonstrate how they are accomplishing the goals that the school establishes for its educational programs. To be accredited, according to current Commission Standards, means that a theological school has resources appropriate to graduate theological education in general, that its resources are appropriate to the school's

particular mission and educational programs, *and* that it is able to demonstrate the extent to which its educational and institutional goals are being achieved.

Accreditation by the ATS Commission on Accrediting, during each of these historical moments, 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 current Standards of Accreditation was 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 the 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 the twentieth century, the understanding of “acceptable level” continued to escalate so that accrediting standards were more rigorous and sophisticated at the end of the century 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 and central to 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 postbaccalaureate 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 for lay persons, in urban training centers and institutes that educate religious leaders who do not have baccalaureate degrees, in baccalaureate degree granting institutions, and in the graduate professional institutes that are accredited member schools of the Commission on Accrediting. These are all viable forms of theological education needed by congregational and other religious communities. The purpose of Commission accreditation, however, is to make judgments about one segment of theological education comprising postbaccalaureate, degree-granting, educational institutions located in Canada or the United States.

The Components of Commission Accreditation

The activities of accreditation have a variety of characteristics, 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 of Accreditation (“Standards”) and *Policies and Procedures* (“Procedures”) that have been adopted by the Commission’s membership. The Standards and Procedures are published online and in print in 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, planning, evaluation, integrity, theological curriculum, library resources, faculty, students, governance, finance, and distance education. The second part has a general standard about educational programs that identifies general educational qualities for graduate theological degrees that transcend particular degree program expectations. It then sets forth specific Standards for each type of degree program offered by accredited schools that define an agreed-upon understanding of their purpose, content, location, duration, resources, and admission requirements.

Both the institutional and the educational Standards identify minimum expectations of accredited schools and directions about institutional improvement. The Commission Standards of Accreditation 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, evaluation committees, and the Board conduct their respective work in the accreditation process.

Through its Board of Commissioners, the Commission *accredits* an institution on the basis of the standards as a whole and *approves* each of the degree programs the institution offers on the basis of the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards*. The *Self-Study Handbook* provides guidance about the use and interpretation of the Commission standards in Chapter Five, "Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation."

Institutional Self-Evaluation

During the past 50 years, accreditation procedures, including the Commission's, 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 to identify how the school is implementing the expectations of the standards, to identify how the school can improve, and to contribute to institutional planning. The self-study report should be fair, candid, and thoughtfully informative for the school and the peer review committee. The *Handbook* provides comprehensive guidance about the self-study process in Chapter 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 have

been trained in the interpretation and application of the standards as well as procedures for their work as accreditation evaluation committee members. They function, however, as peer evaluators who contribute their time and expertise to the school being evaluated on behalf of Commission. 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. Chapter Four of this *Handbook* provides extensive counsel for persons serving on Commission accreditation evaluation committees, "Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees." Chapter 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 reports 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 16 to 20 members (80 percent from accredited institutions and 20 percent public members or ministry practitioners—persons unrelated to Commission schools as employees, students, or board members) 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.

The 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 be prompted as a consequence of schools' efforts to meet Commission General Institutional and Educational 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 evaluation 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 US 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 both resources and institutional practices that are 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, provides an external, independent judgment about the strengths and weaknesses of an institution and encourages 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 as well as 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 postsecondary 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. The majority 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.

Accreditation evaluation visits on occasion may include *joint visits* (one committee jointly representing two accrediting agencies throughout the entire visit, with separate reports issued subsequently); *coordinated visits* (two committees representing two accrediting agencies that coordinate some interviews during the visit); or *concurrent visits* (two committees representing two accrediting agencies whose visits occur at the same time, but do not work together in any fashion). Due to requirements of the US Department of Education, very few visits are now conducted as either joint or coordinated visits. Schools should consult with their ATS Commission staff liaison at least a year before the visit to see if either type of visit is permitted. Concurrent visits, on the other hand, are the sole discretion of the school, unless the school wishes to write a combined self-study report that is not organized according to Commission standards, in which case the school must first receive permission from its ATS Commission staff liaison.

If a school is granted permission from ATS Commission staff to write a combined self-study report (for any of these types of visits), that report must include a chart or table indicating on what exact pages each Commission standard is addressed. Accreditation that is not recognized by either the US Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is not regulated. 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 infrequently in theological education, but it has happened. 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. This Washington-based, nongovernmental 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 US 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 US citizens. In the case of recognition by the US Department of Education, accrediting agencies are regulated, and some standards and procedures of the Commission on Accrediting have been adopted to meet US federal regulations.

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