

# How the ATS School for Peer Reviewers supports quality assurance and strengthens accreditation

*Every Commission on Accrediting (COA) member school participates in the ongoing cycle of self-study and evaluation visits that constitute the accreditation process. They share responsibility for sustaining this rigorous peer review process, yet few see the preparation behind the scenes that helps make evaluation visits effective. One important part of this process is having highly trained peer reviewers. These are faculty, administrators, and practitioners who volunteer hundreds of hours to ensure the quality, enhancement, and improvement of theological education.*

To support this vital work, the COA hosts the School for Peer Reviewers. Now in its eighth year, this intensive training program prepares evaluators to exercise sound judgment, interpret standards within each school's particular setting, and produce reports that support school improvement.

"I said 'yes' [to serving as a peer reviewer] because I see peer review as an act of shared stewardship," says Rafael Candelaria, president of Seminario Teológico de Puerto Rico. "ATS accreditation is not merely about compliance, but about helping theological schools live more faithfully into their mission. Serving as a peer reviewer allows me to contribute my perspective while learning alongside colleagues committed to the vitality and integrity of theological education."



The 2026 School for Peer Reviewers included 32 participants and was held at the ATS office in Pittsburgh on January 12-13.

## **Objectives of the School for Peer Reviewers**

Each year, ATS staff invite a different group into this intensive learning space, strengthening the pool of peer reviewers who serve schools through the accreditation process. Over two days, participants focus on the following:

- **Sharpening judgment and evaluative reasoning.**  
Participants practice reading case studies against COA *Standards of Accreditation*, and in light of the educational principles that ground the standards, learning to weigh evidence and distinguish objective observations from subjective interpretations.
- **Enhancing skill and procedural fluency.**  
Reviewers examine the expectations for evaluation visits, including the policies and procedures that govern visits and reports, what questions can be most fruitful to ask during interviews, and how to approach writing assignments after the visit.
- **Deepening wise application of standards across diverse contexts.**  
Through case studies and discussions, participants learn to apply standards thoughtfully in varied and sometimes complex situations, all while holding institutional distinctiveness and mission together with COA expectations.

This training is intentionally structured to serve the COA's purpose of enhancing and improving theological education through the accreditation of ATS member schools. The School for Peer Reviewers equips participants to carry out this mission with rigor, fairness, and situational discernment.

"I was struck by how intentionally the School for Peer Reviewers was designed," says Brad Roderick, vice president of academic affairs and associate professor of missions at Trinity Anglican Seminary, a peer reviewer who attended the school in January. "Everything from who we were seated with to the assignments and case studies was crafted to mirror the dynamics of an actual visiting team. Our tables brought together academic officers, CFOs, librarians, and others, which meant I was constantly learning from perspectives I don't normally encounter. People asked questions I never would have thought to ask, and the case studies came alive because of that mix. The whole structure kept the experience fresh, interactive, and deeply practical."

### ***Stewardship of theological education***

Peer reviewers carry a shared responsibility for the quality and credibility of accreditation. As they interpret standards within each school's mission and context, they help sustain the trust that binds the process together across the membership.

"Peer review is an act of trust," notes Barbara Mutch, ATS senior director of accreditation. "Schools entrust their stories and their evidence to colleagues who are pre-

pared to listen well, ask disciplined questions, and offer evidence-based assessments with care."

In this way, peer review is a living expression of stewardship. It is shaped by shared standards and sound judgment, and grounded in a common commitment to student learning, institutional vitality, and the public good served by theological education.

"I left the school with a strong sense of the thoughtfulness, care, and mutuality in the larger accreditation process, and the understanding that peer reviewers make a small offering to that broader work," says Elizabeth Ford Friend, senior lecturer in the doctoral programs at Virginia Theological Seminary. "Peer review is about shared listening—listening for silences, for what is not said—while approaching the work with curiosity, creativity, and openness," she says.

That spirit of shared listening also shapes the reviewers themselves. That formative dimension is central to how many reviewers describe their experience.

"Serving as a peer reviewer for institutional assessment cycles is one important way I have been formed as a theological educator," says Miriam Perkins, professor of theology and society at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan. "It is institutional service that ensures theological schools are in mutual conversation across institutional and denominational contexts. At ATS, the assessment conversation is about support, calling, and accountability in the quest to honor God with heart, mind, and strength."

### ***What peer reviewers do***

Peer review is a rigorous service that typically requires 80 hours of work per visit. Responsibilities include:



**Evidence review:** Read the school's self-study and supporting documents against COA Standards before arriving on campus.



**Evaluative synthesis:** Identify institutional strengths and areas of concern based on the evidence gathered.



**Interviews:** Conduct two-plus days of on-site conversations with faculty, students, and staff.



**Report writing:** Craft a precise, evidence-based report that informs the COA's final accreditation actions.