

This document was prepared for the 2022 Self-Study Workshop by Tom Tanner, one of the directors of accreditation at ATS. Those directors have read hundreds of self-study reports and have learned some things that they want to share with you about what makes for a good self-study report.

Begin with the end in mind...



Four questions to consider for this session:

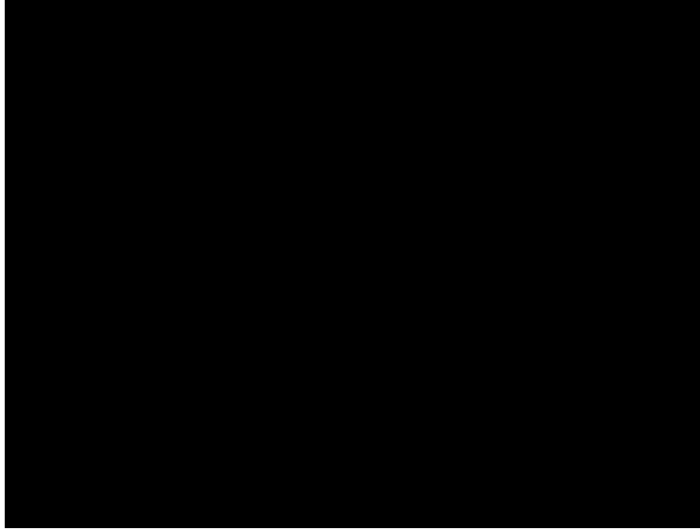
- 1) What key issues are worth discussing during your self-study? (see slide #8)
- 2) Why should your report include recommendations? (see slide #14)
- 3) How do you address “dissent” during a self-study? (see slide #21)
- 4) How long should a self-study report be? (see slide #23)

ATS Commission on Accrediting: Self-Study Workshop—Session on Self-Study Report

As you will see during this Self-Study Workshop, the self-study process has many components. But as you begin your self-study, perhaps the most important is to use this process to write a good self-study report that describes and documents how well your school meets the ATS Standards of Accreditation—and addresses the issues that are most pressing for your school. As you work your way through these slides, please keep in mind the questions raised here.

Before we begin, a caution...

If you're going to work that hard, do the right car...



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While it's not necessary, you may want to watch a brief (30 second) clip on YouTube that illustrates in a humorous way the importance of "doing the right car," i.e., writing the right report. You can find that video clip here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJMBwBUP5CQ>

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

- 1) **Three goals** for self-study
- 2) **Three characteristics** of self-study report
- 3) **Three features** of self-study reports
- 4) **Four parts** of the report
- 5) **Three last things** to remember



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This session will address “five things” to remember in writing the “right” report. You can learn more about these five things in the new Self-Study Handbook, a document which you will want to consult regularly throughout your school’s self-study process (see the third slide from now).



ATS Commission on Accrediting: Self-Study Workshop—Session on Self-Study Report

We have a lot of content to cover, so “hang on to your hats.”

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

- 1) **Three goals for self-study**
- 2) Three characteristics of self-study report
- 3) Three features of *good/weak* reports
- 4) Four parts of the report
- 5) Three last things to remember



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The first of the five things we will cover in this session is the “three goals for self-study.”

But first.... Overview of 2020 *Self-Study Handbook*

Introduction (history, educational principles, overview)

Part 1: The Self-Study Process (goals, organizing, resources)

→ **Part 2: The Self-Study Report** (characteristics, structure)

Part 3: The Self-Study Visit (before, during, after)

Appendices:

A. Link to Standards with Self-Study Ideas Discussed in other session

B. Requirements for Title IV Participants Will review later in this session

C. Crosswalk from 2010-12 Standards to 2020 Standards Discussed in other session

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As noted earlier, the new *Self-Study Handbook* has a wealth of information to help schools conducting a self-study. The three parts of the Handbook are listed here, as well as three very important appendices. This session will focus on Part 2: The Self-Study Report.

1) Three goals for self-study

Internal goals:

- Discuss key issue(s)
- Begin new planning process

Where do we most
need to improve?
Or, what is our
biggest challenge?

External goals:

- Demonstrate educational quality to peers
- Provide quality assurance to public(s)

Telling your story to strangers
who are sympathetic but objective

Eternal goals:

- Reflect on what matters
most to your mission



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A good self-study keeps in mind three overall goals. A school might have several “internal goals” for this process, e.g., discussing key issues or beginning a new strategic planning process. Among the two most important “external goals” are demonstrating educational quality to peers (other ATS schools) and providing quality assurance to various publics (e.g., current and future students and donors). Perhaps, however, the most important set of goals for a good self-study process may be termed “eternal goals.” Self-study is an opportunity to reflect on what matters most to your school and its mission, to have rich and rewarding conversations about theological things that have eternal consequences.

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

- 1) Three goals for self-study
- 2) **Three characteristics of self-study report**
- 3) Three features of *good/weak* reports
- 4) Four parts of the report
- 5) Three last things to remember



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The second of the “five things” addresses “three characteristics of self-study reports.”

2) Three characteristics of self-study reports

Provide sufficient description

Telling your story
to strangers

Document appropriate evaluation

sympathetic
but objective

Identify strategic recommendations

and want to
see you
improve

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Providing sufficient description reminds schools that they are essentially “telling their story” through their self-study report, and it is a story being told “to strangers” (i.e., peer evaluators from other ATS schools who are not familiar with your school’s particular story). The second characteristic reminds schools that the “strangers” who read your story are “sympathetic” (they ARE peers) but they also have a very specific task—to evaluate your school objectively in light of the Standards. That task is much easier for them if your self-study report reflects appropriate evaluation. And finally, a good self-study report should “identify strategic recommendations,” that is, answer the “so what” question: now that we’ve done this self-study, what have we learned and what will we change to better achieve our mission?

2) Three characteristics of self-study reports

Provide sufficient description

Document appropriate evaluation

Identify strategic recommendations

Weak report: *“We have sufficient faculty, and they are all sufficiently qualified.”*

Good report: *“We have seven full-time faculty; six have PhD degrees and one has a DMin (see [Faculty Credentials](#) for detailed list).”*



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Regarding the first characteristic (provide sufficient description), remember that the readers of your self-study report are “strangers” to your story. So, be sure to provide them the details they need. The two examples here illustrate how a “weak” report does not do that and how a “good” report does do that. Notice that the phrase “Faculty Credentials” is linked to a document that provides further details for the reviewer. Adding links to additional details is a good practice.

2) Three characteristics of self-study reports

Provide sufficient description

Document appropriate evaluation

Identify strategic recommendations

Weak report: *“Our SLAP efforts have produced significant improvements.”*

Good report: *“Our Student Learning Assessment Program (affectionately called SLAP by students) has produced these three improvements in student learning this past year. First...”*

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Here is another example of a “weak” vs. a “good” report in terms of providing sufficient description for those who are “strangers to your story.” Just a reminder that if you use acronyms in your self-study report (e.g., “SLAP”), please provide a list near the beginning of your report that explains those acronyms.

2) Three characteristics of self-study reports

Provide sufficient description

Document appropriate evaluation

Identify strategic recommendations

Weak report: *“We try hard not to spend more than we take in.”*

Good report:

“The seminary has balanced its budget four of the last five years, as Table 8.6 below demonstrates. The deficit of \$74,892 in FY19 represented only a 2.5% overage due to an unexpected need to replace a furnace. We have since established a ‘contingency fund’ for such emergencies, with a line-item budget of \$50,000 per year.”

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The second characteristic of a good self-study report is to “document appropriate evaluation.” Note the difference in the two examples here. The first one provides no evaluation at all; the second one gives the reader a context for a more appropriate evaluation of the school’s financial history.

2) Three characteristics of self-study reports

Provide sufficient description

Document appropriate evaluation

Identify strategic recommendations

Weak report: *“We know more should be done to address our lack of board diversity, and we are working on that.”*

Good report:

“Given our global mission and given that one fourth of our students and staff are minorities, while no one on the board is, our trustees have set a goal of recruiting one new minority trustee each year for the next five years until our board more fairly represents our constituency and our mission. Our first African American trustee will begin her term this fall.”

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The third characteristic of a good self-study report is to “identify strategic recommendations.” Those recommendations help answer the “so what” question. Now that your school has spent two years or so in self-study, what have you learned and how will you use what you have learned to improve your school? Note the differences in the two examples cited here. The first one acknowledges a problem but offers no solutions. The second one gives specific and strategic recommendations to address that problem.

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

- 1) Three goals for self-study
- 2) Three characteristics of self-study report
- 3) **Three features of self-study reports**
- 4) Four parts of the report
- 5) Three last things to remember



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The third of “five things” addresses the “three features of self-study reports.”

3) Three features of self-study reports

Describe the self-study process

Telling your story
to strangers

Present the data crucial to understanding

sympathetic but objective

Demonstrate objectivity and honesty

and want to see you improve

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As in slide #10 on three characteristics of good self-study reports, the three features of good self-study reports recognize that your self-study report is “telling your story to strangers” who are “sympathetic but objective” and who “want to see you improve.” The evaluators who visit your school are your peers who want to help your school achieve its mission. Writing a self-study report that has these three features will help them do that.

3) Three features of self-study reports

Describe the self-study process

Present the data crucial to understanding

Demonstrate objectivity and honesty

Introduction describes process

Process **engages the community**

Reflected in report and interviews

Caution:

Summarize process in 1-2 pages

If use people's names, use titles too



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The first feature is to “describe the self-study process.” The Introduction to your report should do that briefly in a way that shows how the process “engaged the community,” i.e., that self-study was just that: *self*-study and not something that the school “farmed out” to others or only to a few. Reading the self-study report should be like looking in an institutional mirror at the “real” you, not looking through a stained-glass window at the “rosy ideal” of you.

3) Three features of self-study reports

Describe the self-study process

Present the data crucial to understanding

Demonstrate objectivity and honesty

Be clear and concise with data

Use qualitative and quantitative data

Tell *their* story

Use tables and charts to support narrative

Caution:

Use links for extensive data

But include summary data in text

When using links, make easy to use →

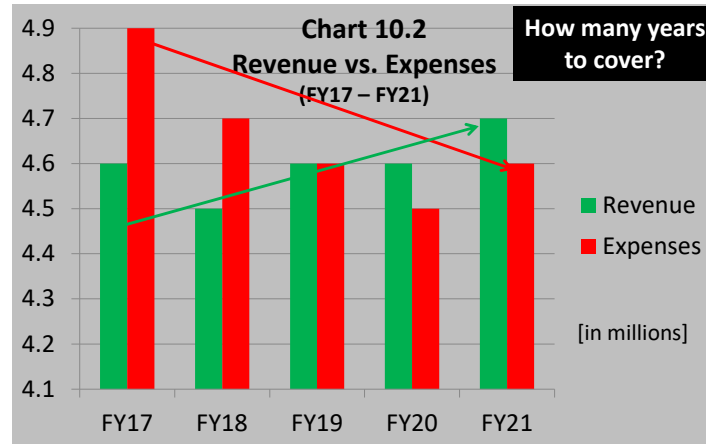
Don't use
multiple
passwords

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The second feature of a good self-study report is “presenting the data crucial to understanding.” Note the tips provided here: being clear and concise with data, using qualitative *and* quantitative data, and using tables and charts to support the textual narrative. Note also the cautions here. The next two slides illustrate some of these tips and cautions.

3) Three features of self-study reports

Present the data crucial to understanding



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A reader looking at this one simple chart can learn as much about a school's recent financial history as reading several paragraphs of text. It's easy to see from this chart that revenues are increasing, and expenses are decreasing. As for the boxed question ("How many years to cover?"), a self-study report should provide at least three years' worth of data, if possible, to show any trends, though five years (as in this example) will usually be more helpful. For some sets of data, a ten-year display may be most helpful (i.e., the period since the school's last comprehensive visit, for many schools), though things can change so significantly so soon that information from a decade ago may no longer be relevant.

3) Three features of self-study reports

Describe the self-study process

Present the data crucial to understanding

Demonstrate objectivity and honesty

Weak report: “Most of our MDiv students are placed.”

Good report: “Over the last five years our MDiv graduates have averaged a 90% placement rate, with a steady increase each year, as **Benchmarks** Table 4.1 shows.”

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A second example of “presenting the data crucial to understanding” is provided here. Words like “most” in a report leave the reader wondering if that means 51% or 99%? Providing more details helps the reader understand your story better. The circled item here refers to an accompanying table, where more specific information can be provided without cluttering the text. The green boxed item here suggest that it would be even more helpful if your data were benchmarked against something, e.g., other peers or data from the ATS Annual Data Tables or ATS Graduating Questionnaires (both available on the ATS website under “Resources → Institutional Data”).

3) Three features of self-study reports

Describe the self-study process

Present the data crucial to understanding

Demonstrate objectivity and honesty

2 reports?

Weak report: “Morale on campus is much better.”

Good report:

“Three years ago faculty morale hit a low point when a doctrinal controversy led to the dismissal of a popular professor. The seminary followed its procedures (documented in our personnel files), but it was a very difficult time. Since then, the board and administration have worked hard to rebuild unity, with significant success—as noted in the recent faculty survey (see [2020 Faculty Survey](#), item #8).”



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The third feature of a good self-study report is “demonstrating objectivity and honesty.” The red box refers to a school that once submitted two self-study reports: the school’s and then a second “minority report” that took issue with the first one. That is never a good idea! The self-study report should objectively and honestly represent the institution as a whole. It should include differences of opinion where appropriate, but the report must be written with one institutional voice. The “weak” example here leaves the reader wondering what happened. The “good” example here fills in the details—succinctly but objectively. Notice that confidential personnel files should NOT be linked in a self-study report; instead, the reader should be told where those can be found during the visit (as here). The red arrow illustrates how to cite a long document that has many items.

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

- 1) Three goals for self-study
- 2) Three characteristics of self-study report
- 3) Three features of self-study reports
- 4) **Four parts of the report**
- 5) Three last things to remember



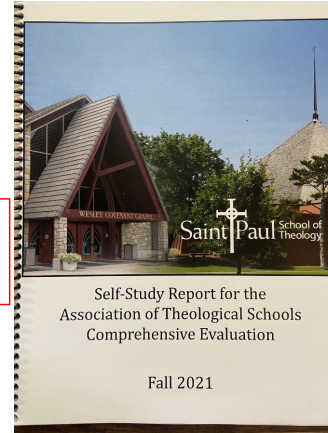
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The fourth of “five things” addresses the “four parts of the report,” which will be addressed in the next 11 slides or about a third of this session.

4) Four parts of the report

1. Introduction (5-8 pages)
 2. School Synopsis (1-2 pages)
 3. Main Narrative (50-80 pages)
 4. Conclusion (4-5 pages)
-
- (60-95 pages)

Print and
PDF on
flash drive



Appendices (do not print; on flash drive only)

NOTE: See slide #31 for how to include other documents

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This slide enumerates the four parts of the report, including a new section never required before (circled in red above). The red font on this slide clarifies which items are to be printed (only the self-study report—all 4 parts) and which items are to be provided digitally on a flash drive (the report and the appendices). The next 10 slides will unpack these four parts. Whereas self-study reports under the pre-2020 Standards were typically 125-150 pages long, reports under the new 2020 Standards are generally about half that long (60-95 pages), depending especially on how many degree programs a school offers. Please keep in mind that the “Self-Study Ideas” (see discussion in earlier session for this workshop) present multiple ways for a school to consider in documenting how it meets a standard. The self-study report should NOT address ALL those suggested ideas in addressing a given standard.

4) Four parts of the report

1. Introduction (5-8 pages)

Merging? Moving?
New curriculum?

- ✓ *Introduce the school (mission/history)*
- ✓ *Review accreditation history (since last visit)*
- ✓ *Give overview of the self-study process*
- ✓ *Identify any special features of the report*
- ✓ *Summarize any major changes (since last visit)*
- ✓ *Orient readers to any unique school issues*

No students on campus during visit?

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The Introduction sets the context for the entire self-study report and includes the items listed here. The items in the green boxes provide examples of what a school's self-study report might include in addressing the last two items listed here.

4) Four parts of the report

New!!!!

Self-Study Handbook (pp. 22-23)

2. School Synopsis (1-2 pages)

9
items

- 1) List of all degrees (# credits, # students)
- 2) List of all additional locations (% of degree)
- 3) List of all modalities (onsite, online, offsite)
- 4) Number of faculty/staff (FT & PT), trustees
- 5) Relationship with any denomination(s)
- 6) List of any other accrediting agencies
- 7) Link to school's announcement about visit
- 8) Link to school's statement of accreditation
- 9) Indication of whether school is in Title IV

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The second of the report's four parts is a new part. These 9 items are explained more fully on pp. 22-23 of the new *Self-Study Handbook*. If you have any questions about any of them, please consult with your school's ATS Commission staff liaison.

4) Four parts of the report

3. *Main Narrative* (5-8 pages per Standard)

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Mission and Integrity | 6. Library Services |
| 2. Planning and Evaluation | 7. Student Services |
| 3. Student Learning and Formation | 8. Faculty |
| 4. Master's Degrees | 9. Governance and Administration |
| 5. Doctoral Degrees | 10. Institutional Resources |

Include all 10 chapters, even if #5 does not apply (just say: "5. Doctoral Degrees: The school has no doctoral programs.")

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The third of the report's four parts constitutes the bulk of your self-study report. It **MUST** be arranged in the order given (the order of the new Standards). The next slide will unpack Standards 4 and 5.

4) Four parts of the report → 3. Main Narrative

(unpack Standards 4 and 5 a bit)

Standard 4. Master's Degrees Standard 5. Doctoral Degrees

4.1-5 *Master of Divinity* 5.1-6 *Doctor of Ministry*

4.6-9 *Master of Arts* 5.7-10 *Other Professional Dr*

4.10-12 *Master of Theology (ThM / STM)* 5.11-16 *Doctor of Philosophy Doctor of Theology*

If more than one MA or Professional Doctorate, may discuss together or separately, depending on degree structure. If one of these 6 groupings is not offered, indicate that in report (e.g., "The school does not offer the ThM, so Standards 4.10-12 are not applicable.") NOTE: See *Self-Study Handbook*, p. 23.

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Standards 4 and 5 reflect the greatest reduction between the pre-2020 and 2020 Standards, reducing the former ten degree categories to only six. Please note that Standards 4.6-9 on the MA combine professional and academic MA degrees and that Standards 5.7-10 combine the former separate degree standards for the EdD, DMiss, DMA, etc.

4) Four parts of the report → 3. Main Narrative

One suggested structure per chapter:

- ❑ *brief description of school's resources for that standard*
- ❑ *critical evaluation of school's alignment with standard*
- ❑ *list of strengths of the school in terms of that standard*
- ❑ *strategic recommendations to improve in that standard*

NOTE: If not meeting standard, must describe plans to do so.

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One suggestion for how to structure each chapter (one chapter per Standard) is listed here, though other approaches may also work. Feel free to consult with your ATS Commission staff liaison if you have any questions.

4) Four parts of the report

4. Conclusion (4-5 pages)

- ✓ Summarize overall findings of self-study
- ✓ Organize and prioritize strengths
- ✓ Organize and prioritize concerns
- ✓ Organize and prioritize recommendations

4-7 key recommendations, not 40-70
(see page 24 of *Self-Study Handbook*)

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Just as the Introduction (slide #25) introduces your school's story, the Conclusion provides a summary of what you have learned during the self-study process. The list here is one helpful way to think about what to include in the Conclusion. The green box points out that the school should prioritize the most important issues to be addressed, not list every possible concern or issue raised during the self-study.

4) Four parts of the report: final item (after 4 parts)

Appendix (*bookmarked in single PDF; on flash drive only*)

1. Current organizational chart, showing names and titles
2. Current strategic plan(s)
3. Current evaluation plan(s) (summarize results in report)
4. Current budget (if embedded, just unit) + 3-5-year budget plan
5. Most recent fiscal year audit (and management letter, if one)
6. Handbooks: Board, faculty, staff, and student
7. Academic catalog (include as bookmarked PDF)

Other items (e.g., syllabi, minutes) are linked and/or in “Supplemental Materials” folder on flash drive (see pages 24-26 of *Self-Study Handbook*)

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As noted in slide #11, it is always helpful to provide links throughout the self-study report to various documents and websites that amplify and support the text of your report. Feel free to include as many of those links as you wish, which may include dozens or scores of items. However, the ATS Board of Commissioners is very clear that there are seven items that **MUST** be included in a separate appendix—and only these seven items are to be included in a document on the flash drive that is labelled “Appendix.” Note the instructions in the green box here.

4) Four parts of the report: Title IV reminder (new)

No “Targeted Issues Checklist” but see Appendix B of *Self-Study Handbook*

1. **Standard 3.2 on Academic Rigor:** While every school must demonstrate academic rigor, a Title IV school must document how it meets the federal definition of a credit hour. To verify that it does, the school must provide to the evaluation committee a sampling of syllabi that represent all types of courses, course lengths, degree programs, and delivery modalities.
2. **Standard 3.11 on Educational Policies:** While every school must have and follow the policies described in this standard, a Title IV school must also demonstrate it has and follows a “Satisfactory Academic Progress” policy.

99 (38%) of 262 accredited schools are NOT in Title IV
[30 of those 99 are in Canada]
ATS Commission is Title IV “gatekeeper” for only 76 schools

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The next three slide address a new feature that every school that participates in US Title IV financial aid programs must address. This approach replaces the former “Targeted Issues Checklist.” There are seven items that must be addressed under the appropriate Standards in the school’s self-study report (see Appendix B of *Self-Study Handbook*). This slide lists the first two of those seven items. The documentation for these two items may be included as a link in the narrative discussing those standards, and/or it may be included as separate items in the “Supplemental Materials” folder on the flash drive (see slide #30).

4) Four parts of the report: Important reminder (new)

No “Targeted Issues Checklist” but see Appendix B of *Self-Study Handbook*

3. **Standard 3.12 on Transfer of Credit Policy:** While every school must have and follow an appropriate transfer of credit policy, a Title IV school must also document any articulation agreements for transfer of credits with other accredited schools or any contracts with non-accredited entities to provide up to one-fourth of a degree.
4. **Standard 7.5 on Student Safety:** While every school must provide a safe environment for students, a Title IV school must also document that it meets the Clery Act for campus security.
5. **Standard 7.9 on Student Debt:** While every school must regularly review student educational debt and develop strategies as needed to reduce debt, a Title IV school must also provide its most recent federal student loan cohort default rate and its response to any excessive default rate. National avg. around 10%; ATS avg. around 4%

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Listed here are the next three of the seven items that all Title IV participants must address in their self-study reports (under the appropriate Standard). The statement in the red box refers to federal student loan cohort default rates—in the US and among ATS schools. The documentation for these three items may be included as a link in the narrative discussing those standards, and/or it may be included as separate items in the “Supplemental Materials” folder on the flash drive (see slide #30).

4) Four parts of the report: Important reminder (new)

No “Targeted Issues Checklist” but see Appendix B of *Self-Study Handbook*

6. **Standard 7.11 on Placement:** While every school must monitor placement rates, a Title IV school that uses those rates for marketing or recruitment purposes (excluding its public statement of educational effectiveness, per Standard 2.8) must document that those rates have been verified by an external entity.
7. **Standard 10.7 on Financial Aid Audits:** While every school must conduct an independent audit every year of its institutional finances, a Title IV school must also provide a copy of its most recent federal financial aid audit and its response to any findings. If the school has a “financial responsibility composite score” below 1.5, as determined by the US Department of Education (USDE), the school must provide a copy of that USDE letter and the school’s response (e.g., posting a letter of credit, being subject to heightened cash monitoring).

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Listed here are the last two of the seven items that all Title IV participants must address in their self-study reports. The documentation for item #7 above may be included as a link in the narrative discussing Standard 10.7, and/or it may be included as a separate item in the “Supplemental Materials” folder on the flash drive (see slide #30).

Five things to remember to do the “right” report:

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- 5) Three last things to remember



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We come now to the end of this session (with one more slide to go), concluding with “three last things to remember.”

The 3 last things to remember

Tell *your story*

in light of *the Standards*

to improve your *students and school*



ATS Commission on Accrediting: Self-Study Workshop—Session on Self-Study Report

To sum up this session on writing good self-study reports, please remember these three things. Your self-study report is your opportunity to “tell your story” and to tell that story “in light of the Standards” in ways that will help you “improve your students and your school.” May God bless you in this worthy work. We can’t wait to see “where this journey will take you.”