

Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation (with Appendix: Guidelines for Readiness Reports)

(Approved by ATS Board of Commissioners in January 2020, effective July 2020)

NOTE: These guidelines are effective July 1, 2020, following approval in June 2020 of new *Policies and Procedures* (see Chapter I Commission Membership Criteria and Chapter II Achieving Accreditation). These guidelines replace the 2016 *Guidelines for Petitioning for Candidate for Accredited Member Status*, since candidacy is no longer a membership category. Schools that had candidate status prior to June 2020 retain that status until they achieve initial accreditation or until June 1, 2022, whichever comes first.

I. First Steps in Pursuing Initial Accreditation

Each school receiving Associate Member status is assigned a Commission staff liaison, who will work with that school to determine an appropriate plan and timeline for pursuing initial accreditation. The initial procedures for gaining Commission accreditation typically involve these steps:

1. Within the first year of receiving Associate Membership the school's chief administrative officer notifies the Commission staff liaison of when it intends to begin pursuing initial accreditation, including a proposed plan and timeline, which the staff liaison will review.
2. The next step includes these options:
 - a. If the school intends to begin the self-study process within 18 months of becoming an Associate Member and is already accredited or recognized by an appropriate agency (one recognized by the Department of Education in the U.S. or by a provincial quality assurance agency in Canada), the staff reviews the proposed plan and timeline, giving feedback as needed. The school is then invited to send representatives to the next appropriate self-study workshop to learn ATS Commission expectations for self-study.
 - b. If the school intends to begin the self-study process more than 18 months after becoming an Associate Member or is not already accredited or recognized by an appropriate agency (one recognized by the Department of Education in the U.S. or by a provincial quality assurance agency in Canada), the staff liaison schedules a visit to the school at the school's expense at a mutually agreeable time. Several weeks prior to the visit, the school submits a brief "readiness" report (see Appendix). That report documents how "ready" the school is to begin a self-study process by describing how well it meets all applicable standards or what it plans to do to meet any standards it currently does not. If the report and visit indicate the school is ready to begin the self-study process, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next self-study workshop to learn how to conduct a complete self-study to meet ATS Commission expectations. If not, the liaison notifies the school of any concerns to be addressed in a revised report. Once the school submits a revised report adequately addressing those concerns, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next workshop.

Note: If it becomes evident that the school cannot achieve initial accreditation within its five-year term as an Associate Member, the school should consult with its Commission staff liaison and, at the appropriate time, either request the ATS Board of Directors to renew its Associate membership for another five-year term (see *ATS Procedures Related to Membership*, II.C.4) or notify the ATS Board of Directors it is withdrawing from membership.

3. Upon completing one of the two options described above, the school undergoes a self-study process (typically ranging from 18 to 24 months) that results in a self-study report. The report must follow the guidelines in the Board's *Self-Study Handbook* and be submitted to the Commission by the date specified by that school's liaison.

II. Next Steps in Achieving Initial Accreditation

- A. Based on the school's self-study report, the Commission staff liaison first prepares a staff recommendation for the Board of Commissioners, evaluating whether the school is prepared to host a visit for initial accreditation. Second, the Board reviews the staff recommendation, along with the school's self-study report, and decides whether to authorize an initial accreditation visit. Third, if authorized, the school hosts a visit for initial accreditation, which results in an evaluation committee report (see II.B below for next steps). If not authorized, the Board communicates to the school the reason(s) it believes the school is not ready for initial accreditation, and the staff liaison then works with the school to determine when it might be ready to submit a revised self-study report that adequately addresses the reason(s) listed.
- B. The final steps for gaining initial accreditation culminates with the Board's review of the school's self-study report and the evaluation committee's report, along with any school response to that report. The Board then decides whether to grant initial accreditation (the maximum length is seven years) and under what conditions (e.g., any follow-up reports). If initial accreditation is granted, the Board communicates that decision and any conditions in writing to the school within 30 days. The Board also makes that information public by updating the school's membership status on the ATS website.

III. Steps if Initial Accreditation Denied

If initial accreditation is denied, the Board communicates the reason(s) why in writing to the school within 30 days and posts that letter on its public website after any appeal period ends. A school denied initial accreditation has four options: (1) appeal the decision within 30 days (see appeals policy in *Commission Policies*); (2) resubmit, in consultation with the Commission staff liaison, an updated self-study report that addresses the reason(s) listed in the Board's denial decision (at which point the procedures described in II above will be followed); (3) petition the ATS Board of Directors for one renewal of its five-year Associate Member term, if initial accreditation cannot be gained within the first five years; or (4) voluntarily withdraw from Associate Membership by submitting a letter to that effect to the ATS Board of Directors.

Appendix: *Guidelines for Readiness Reports* (for Associate Schools Seeking Initial Accreditation)

Introduction

Per *Commission Policies II.A* and *Board Procedures II.A.1*, an Associate Member of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) may seek initial accreditation with the Commission on Accrediting in several ways. As described above in the ATS Board of Commissioners' *Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation* (I.1), all Associate Members begin the process as follows: "Within the first year of receiving Associate Membership the school's chief administrative officer notifies the Commission staff liaison of when it intends to begin pursuing initial accreditation, including a proposed plan and timeline, which the staff liaison will review." As also described in those *Guidelines* (I.2), schools then have one of two options:

- I.2.a If the school intends to begin the self-study process *within 18 months* of becoming an Associate Member *and is already accredited or recognized* by an appropriate agency (one recognized by the Department of Education in the U.S. or by a provincial quality assurance agency in Canada), the staff reviews the proposed plan and timeline, giving feedback as needed. The school is then invited to send representatives to the next self-study workshop to learn ATS Commission expectations for self-study.
- I.2.b If the school intends to begin the self-study process *more than 18 months after* becoming an Associate Member *or is not already accredited or recognized* by an appropriate agency (one recognized by the Department of Education in the U.S. or by a provincial quality assurance agency in Canada), the staff liaison schedules a visit to the school at the school's expense at a mutually agreeable time. Several weeks prior to the visit, the school submits a brief "readiness" report (see [this] Appendix). ...

Overview

These *Guidelines for Readiness Reports* apply only to schools that fall under I.2.b above. As also noted in the remainder of I.2.b in the *Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation* above, the readiness report serves as a very abbreviated self-study report (typically 30-50 pages), documenting how "ready" the school is to begin a self-study process by describing how well it meets all applicable standards or what it plans to do to meet any standards it currently does not. If the report and subsequent visit indicate the school is ready to begin the self-study process, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next self-study workshop to learn how to conduct a complete self-study to meet ATS Commission expectations. If not, the liaison notifies the school of any concerns to be addressed in a revised report. Once the school submits a revised report adequately addressing those concerns, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next self-study workshop.

Process

Unlike a complete self-study report, which takes 18-24 months, the readiness report may be completed in less than a year, often within a few months. And unlike a complete self-study report that engages virtually all key campus constituencies, the readiness report is often developed by a few people, usually the chief academic officer or designee, though it must broadly reflect the perspectives of the school as a whole. The report should reflect what the Commission staff liaison will hear and observe during the visit, when a wide range of constituents will be interviewed (e.g., trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students). Since the readiness report is due several weeks before the staff liaison visit, the school should contact its liaison several months before the date it would like to host a visit to ensure a mutually agreeable date for the visit and to allow for sufficient time for the readiness report to be written.

Contents

Schools preparing a readiness report should consult early in that process with their Commission staff liaison for what should be covered in that report. In general, a readiness report typically consists of the following three parts, totaling 30-50 pages:

- *Introduction* (2-3 pages giving brief overview, history, and any special features of the school)
- *Standards 1-10* (2-5 pages per standard showing how the school meets every applicable standard or what plans it has to meet them; unlike a full self-study report, the readiness report focuses more on description and less on evaluation, describing what capacities it has or plans to have to meet the standards)
- *Conclusion* (1-2 pages summarizing the school's strengths and areas for improvement, as well as any plans to address how the school will meet any standards that it does not currently meet, including a proposed timeline for achieving initial accreditation)

The readiness report should also include links to key documents (e.g., academic catalog, assessment plan, annual budget, most recent audit, list of full-time faculty members and their qualifications, etc.) or include those documents in an accompanying appendix.

Submissions

Several weeks prior to the scheduled visit, the school should email a copy (in *MS Word* or PDF) of its readiness report, with any appendices, to its Commission staff liaison. In consultation with the liaison, the school should also email a proposed schedule of interviews for the staff visit, which the liaison will review for final approval.

Staff Visit

Upon submission of the readiness report, the ATS Commission staff liaison will review it and finalize the dates for a staff visit. The liaison will interview a select number of students, faculty, administrators, trustees, library staff, and other appropriate persons to discern how well the school meets (or has plans to meet) the Commission *Standards of Accreditation*.

Visit Results

Within several weeks following the visit, the Commission office will notify the school officially of the visit results. As noted earlier under Overview, if the report and visit indicate the school is ready to begin the self-study process, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next self-study workshop to learn how to conduct a complete self-study to meet ATS Commission expectations. If not, the liaison notifies the school of any concerns to be addressed in a revised report. Once the school submits a revised report adequately addressing those concerns, the school is then invited to send representatives to the next workshop.

Visit Costs

A visit typically lasts one to two days. The school is responsible for reserving a hotel room (or similar accommodations) for the staff liaison (billed to the school), as well as providing local transportation. The staff liaison will make his or her own travel plans to the school. Near the end of the semester in which the visit occurs, ATS will bill the school for the staff liaison's cost of transportation to the school, including any meals in transit. There is no fee for this type of visit.