

Member school librarian reflects on her involvement in ATS accreditation visits

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary's librarian was recently interviewed regarding her involvement with an ATS accreditation team. The following—reprinted with the seminary's permission—was originally published in its January/February 2022 issue of UPDATE magazine.

Tell us a little about yourself and the role you fill at PRTS.

I have worked at the seminary for thirteen years as the director of the William Perkins Library. I also teach a required research course. I am happily married to John Ladwig, a 2010 PRTS alumnus. We enjoy nature, gardening, cooking, birdwatching, and traditional homesteading skills and are consummate coffee and tea drinkers.

Tell us a little about the William Perkins Library.

The William Perkins Library has nearly one hundred thousand print volumes, almost that many e-books, and seventeen subscription databases. It has probably the largest number of electronic resources (e-books, online journal articles and dissertations, and databases) of any seminary its size in North America. We have two full-time staff members and four student workers. The library itself is an attractive, welcoming place to study.

What is ATS, and how did you first get involved with ATS assessment teams?

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is the largest and most robust accrediting agency for theological schools in North America. When a particular institution comes up for accreditation or re-accreditation, the ATS liaison assembles a team with the expertise and experience to adequately provide a peer assessment or



Laura Ladwig, director of the William Perkins Library at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

evaluation of the institution. I became involved with ATS assessment teams at the request of PRTS's ATS liaison, Dr. Lester Ruiz, whom I first met in 2013 during PRTS's initial accreditation visit. He is someone I respect and from whom I have learned a great deal.

How many assessment teams have you participated in, and how have the experiences benefited you personally and PRTS in general?

I have been a member of four assessment teams so far. One of these was in person, and the remaining three have been conducted via Zoom for various reasons, which presents somewhat of a challenge for successfully evaluating a peer institution.

The experience has been stimulating and stretching for me, both personally and professionally. I learn a great deal from working with professional colleagues in this type of setting. Some of the skills I have learned (or am still learning) include conducting interviews, being a professional peer evaluator, and asking open-ended questions that will yield information that enables me to evaluate whether an institution is aligned with the ATS

standards for educational and institutional effectiveness. Obviously, this requires tact and professional courtesy.

What is a typical visit like?

The team's work begins a month and a half before the actual visit when we receive the school's self-study report and additional documents referenced by the self-study. After reading the report, we meet as a team to discuss our initial conclusions. Each team member is assigned certain standards to write about that reflect that committee member's experience and expertise.

The on-site evaluation visit begins on Monday and ends on Thursday of the same week. On Monday evening, there is a meet-and-greet with various school administrative personnel and board members. Tuesday and Wednesday are days scheduled with back-to-back interviews. The team members interview individuals who can speak to the areas we write about. Sometimes these interviews are conducted in tandem with other committee members who need the input of these individuals to write their own sections of the report. Throughout the visit, the team gathers to debrief and share findings.

After the interviews conclude, the team meets to finalize its initial report. This report includes affirmations, recommendations, and sometimes warnings for the institution. When we are satisfied with our recommendations, we conclude the visit by sharing the report with the institution's administrative staff and leadership. The visiting team submits the final report to the ATS Board of Commissioners, who reviews it and either approves it or not. At that point, the recommendations in the report become public and final.

From your perspective, what benefit do you see in accreditation, and specifically, how has the rigor of accreditations improved PRTS's theological training of an international student body?

I have personally seen a definite return on investment from the accreditation (peer-review) process at PRTS. I was here prior to accreditation, have worked through the process, and am now on the other end of the initial accreditation. PRTS has become a more robust, well-rounded, and thorough educational institution with

evaluative plans in place that enable it to close the loop on assessment, so to speak, thus continually improving itself through its own evaluation and that of its ATS peers. The process forces us to ask questions like "Are we really teaching what we say we are teaching?" and "Are students really learning what we want them to learn?" During the review process, if students are consistently failing to meet the course objectives or the broader degree objectives, then the seminary is obligated to ask one of two questions: 1) Are the objectives attainable, and if not, should they be altered? or 2) If the objectives are to remain constant, what can be done to better help the students more consistently meet the desired outcomes?

Why do you think it is important for potential students, partnering churches, and supportive individuals to know that PRTS is fully accredited with ATS?

PRTS's ATS accreditation demonstrates that the seminary wants to be held accountable for what it teaches. Our ties to ATS enable us to evaluate primarily the academic rigor and sustainability of our degrees, which is important in our service to the academy. Our ties to various denominations indicate PRTS's accountability and service to the church.