

Joining ATS: a review of the associate membership process

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The 2026 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting next month will include a membership vote on 11 theological schools that have applied to join The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The upcoming vote is an important one, since membership carries with it significant privileges and responsibilities. New member schools help steward the past and future character of the Association and the Commission on Accrediting (COA).

An apt comparison of the process and impact of bringing new members into ATS may be the ways schools are faithful and forward-looking in their hiring of faculty and administrators. Both call for attention to and stewardship of the school's mission as well as provision for the future. New colleagues build on the contributions of people in the past and bring fresh energy and thinking, enabling the institution to adapt to current and anticipated realities while maintaining the school's core mission. Schools serve best when they practice what has been called "traditioned innovation."

Inquiry

Schools seek to join ATS with the end goal of accreditation. Accredited status enables them to enhance quality by consenting to accountability, sharing learning with other member schools, and accessing ATS resources. Each school seeking to become an accredited member of the ATS COA must first pursue associate membership in The Association of Theological Schools.¹



Representatives of ATS member schools gather at the most recent ATS/COA Biennial Meeting held in Atlanta, June 2024.

While associate membership does not require the ability to fulfill the COA's *Standards of Accreditation*, discernment assesses the potential of applicant schools to meet those standards within the five-year period of initial associate membership. The membership eligibility criteria are indicators of that potential in eight general areas:

1. Located in the United States or Canada, the school offers graduate professional theological degrees preparing religious leaders for communities of Christian or Jewish faith.
2. Length of service that includes at least one graduating class with the Master of Divinity (MDiv) or a first theological degree.
3. Qualified faculty in number and expertise.
4. Sufficient students for a community of learning.
5. Offers the broad range of theological disciplines necessary for ministry preparation.
6. Open to engaging the community of theological schools represented in ATS.

7. Educational programs characterized by quality, stability, and permanence.

8. Suitable governance and administrative structure.

Reflecting the broad differences among existing member schools, numerous steps of discernment evaluate applicant schools' ability to fulfill these criteria in a variety of ways.

Occasionally, schools submit applications without consulting ATS staff. Normally, though, representatives of the schools considering ATS membership contact Commission staff to discuss qualifications, the process of application, benefits, and responsibilities of membership.² A next step for most schools is consultation with an accrediting liaison for additional guidance.³

Application and evaluation

Looking toward a Biennial Meeting vote of the membership as the final step in welcoming associate members, the application deadline is set in early September of odd-numbered years to give ample time for discernment and decisions. Processing the application occurs during that fall and the following spring prior to the Biennial Meeting vote in June of even numbered years.

Schools apply to ATS in September, and by mid-October, ATS accrediting staff complete a preliminary evaluation to determine viability. The applications first go through a financial review. This step is crucial because membership wisdom has confirmed the importance of financial sustainability for educational quality and institutional thriving. After the financial review, accrediting liaisons examine applications for overall viability. Applications that fundamentally appear to meet the criteria are forwarded to the next step of a site visit by an accrediting liaison. Those

that clearly do not meet or likely could not meet multiple criteria—sometimes schools established only very recently—receive counsel about what would be necessary to submit a viable application and are invited to reapply at a later date.

Between late fall and the following spring, an accrediting liaison will travel to the school for a one-day visit to verify compliance with the membership eligibility criteria and assess the school's "stability and future viability." Prior to the visit, applicants must provide letters of recommendation from five ATS member schools affirming the applicant's viability and "fit" within the Association. The visit includes interviews with key administrators, faculty, staff, students, members of the school's board of directors or advisory board, and any other relevant personnel.

Following the visit, the accrediting liaison prepares a detailed report for the ATS Board of Directors that includes findings related to the membership eligibility criteria and a staff recommendation. The Board considers the report and votes whether to recommend the school to the membership at the Biennial Meeting.

Those schools recommended by the Board are invited to send representatives to the Biennial Meeting. The schools and their representatives are presented both through a brief summary report included in the Biennial Meeting materials and in person to the membership. An affirmative two-thirds vote of those schools in attendance welcomes the applicant into associate membership. Immediately upon acceptance, schools are presented with voting credentials for the subsequent business of the Association.

The initial term of membership in the Association is five years, during which time the new member school is



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expected to work toward fulfillment of the *Standards of Accreditation* and accredited membership in the COA. To help facilitate that process, each new associate member school is assigned an ATS accrediting staff liaison. Schools are invited to send representatives to the self-study workshop designed to help them prepare their self-study reports. If the Board of Commissioners believes a school's self-study report is satisfactory, the Board authorizes a comprehensive evaluation visit followed by a vote by the Board whether to grant accreditation. If a school is not ready within the initial five-year period of membership, the ATS

Board of Directors may approve a single five-year extension of associate membership.

Welcoming new associate member schools is a highlight of the Biennial Meeting!

¹The Commission on Accrediting and The Association of Theological Schools are separate corporations within the overall structure of ATS. While all members of the Commission are also members of the Association, some schools are associate members of the Association in the process of moving toward accredited membership in the Commission.

² See: Stephen R. Graham, "The Benefits of Associate Membership and Accreditation," *Colloquy*, May 2025.

³ "Commission staff" refers to those members of the ATS staff who work in accreditation. "Accrediting liaisons" are Commission staff serving as directors of accreditation.



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