

# Self-study workshop prepares member schools for institutional evaluation and improvement

*The Commission on Accrediting (COA) hosts a semi-annual self-study workshop for institutions preparing for accreditation visits. Facilitated by the accrediting staff and led by Valerie Rempel, director of accreditation, the workshop equips participants with practical tools, shared language, and a clearer understanding of the self-study process. As with past gatherings, the workshop held February 23–24, 2026 at the ATS office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, brought together representatives from ATS member schools for two days of guided learning, continuing a tradition of helping institutions understand how to identify strengths, name challenges, and discern concrete actions that support continuous improvement in theological education.*

## **Approaching the process with intention**

ATS staff led sessions on the foundations of self-study work, the role of the COA, and the *Standards of Accreditation*. They addressed both purpose and practice, emphasizing evaluation and assessment as drivers of institutional improvement. Attendees explored how to structure effective self-study, organize and support committees, develop realistic timelines, and prepare for the visit by the evaluation committee of peer reviewers.

“The self-study workshop was exceptionally helpful in demystifying a complex process, situating evaluation within



The 2026 self-study workshop included 24 participants and was held at the ATS office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on February 23–24.

a framework of peer-led quality assurance for missional effectiveness, and providing practical tools for planning and leading the work,” says Hauna Ondrey, dean of seminary faculty and associate professor of church history at North Park Theological Seminary.

## **Evaluating mission and practice**

Throughout the workshop, facilitators emphasized that when schools engage the process with honesty and broad participation, this phase of review becomes a way to identify patterns across programs. They can evaluate how well mission and practice align, and prioritize next steps that can meaningfully strengthen teaching, formation, and administration.

In addition to formal instruction, the workshop created space for conversation among peers. Participants compared approaches, shared challenges, and reflected honestly on lessons learned from previous accreditation cycles. Many highlighted the benefit of hearing directly from colleagues.

“One of the most valuable parts of the workshop was hearing the examples and honest reflections of peers in the rooms, especially conversations about what has

worked and what hasn't in past self-studies," says Baranda Fermin, director of online learning and institutional effectiveness at Gammon Theological Seminary. "Those shared experiences helped clarify how critical committee structure and collaboration will be for our own process."

Fermin also noted that the workshop provided a reminder that effective self-study depends as much on relationships as it does on planning and reporting.

"The workshop solidified for me that completing a strong self-study isn't just about timelines and documentation. It's about sustaining relationships across the institution," she says. "Keeping people engaged and connected, even when competing priorities arise, will be essential to doing this well."

### ***Providing structure and support***

The workshop emphasized accreditation as formative work that provides an opportunity for reflection, alignment, and institutional learning.

"While ATS/COA serves as an accrediting agency, it also accompanies member schools throughout the process by offering resources and consultation," says Rempel.

"Through the self-study workshop and other initiatives such as the [School for Peer Reviewers](#), we support member schools in learning how to apply the Standards with care, context, and professional judgment."

By the end of the gathering, participants reported greater confidence and a clearer sense of direction.

"As with every ATS event, the workshop was well organized, the staff were supportive, and the opportunity to connect with peer institutions was encouraging," says Ondrey. "Participants in future workshops can expect an effective, practically useful, and missionally encouraging experience that eases anxiety and equips them with concrete tools to begin the self-study process with confidence."

Whether preparing a first-time report or refining long-standing assessment practices, schools attending the 2026 workshop joined a tradition of shared commitment to the ongoing improvement of theological education. Viewed this way, the self-study is not an endpoint tied to an accreditation cycle, but a reflective practice that helps institutions understand themselves more clearly and make intentional choices about where growth is most needed.

### ***What is a self-study?***

A self-study is a comprehensive, school-led process that plays a central role in ATS/COA accreditation. It helps schools:



**Evaluate mission and effectiveness** by examining how well institutional practices and educational programs align with the school's purpose and the shared *Standards of Accreditation*.



**Use evidence to inform judgment** by gathering, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, especially related to student learning and formation.



**Engage the whole community** in sustained reflection, drawing on broad participation from faculty, administrators, students, trustees, and other stakeholders.



**Strengthen planning and improvement** by identifying strengths, naming areas for growth, and translating evaluative insight into concrete actions that support ongoing institutional learning.