Orientation for Distance Education Evaluators

ATS Commission on Accrediting

(revised January 2017)
Agenda for This Training Session:

1) Introduction: An Overview of Online Learning
2) The Commission Standards: An Overview
3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues
5) Writing the Report on Distance Education
6) Conclusion: Three Things to Remember

But first, two reminders (see next two slides)
Reminder #1: Helpful Tips

This session is intended to be a companion to other applicable orientation programs, such as those for new evaluators and for committee chairs. Unlike other training sessions, this one has no audio but does include notes that we hope are helpful.

You might also find it useful to review other orientation materials on the ATS Commission website under “Accrediting: Evaluation Visits”: http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/evaluation-visits

Contact Joshua Reinders (reinders@ats.edu) if you have any questions about these materials.
Reminder #2: Conflicts of Interest

• Each committee member will receive a Conflict of Interest Form from the ATS Commission office. This form **must** be filled out and submitted prior to participation in an evaluation visit.

• “A potential conflict of interest includes the following relationships with a school undergoing evaluation, whether the relationship involves that person or an immediate family member: employment (including past employment or prior/current application for employment); current employment at a school in a consortial relationship; enrollment as a student (past or present, including denial of admission); recipient of an award or honor; provision of goods or services; service as a trustee (past or present); regular recruitment of prospective students or staff; or any other relationship that could threaten a fair and objective evaluation.” (Board of Commissioners *Policy Manual*, I.C.2.d)

• No evaluation committee member who has a potential conflict of interest shall be involved in an evaluation or accrediting decision.

• If you suspect a potential conflict of interest, or have questions about the policy, please contact your Commission staff liaison immediately.
Introduction: An Overview of Online Learning

Distance education commonly refers to **online** education.

Nearly 6 million US students now study online (28% of all US higher education enrollment of around 20 m)—up from 4.6 million in 2008.

Some 360,000 Canadian students now study online (29% of 1.2 million students in Canada are online).

One in 7 (14%) of all US students are exclusively online.

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Notes

Thank you for serving as an evaluator for distance education. We are very grateful.

The first part of this training session provides an overview of distance education—in general and in ATS schools. The US numbers here are taken from *WCET Distance Education Enrollment Report 2016.* The Canadian numbers are from this source.

* http://wcet.wiche.edu/sites/default/files/WCETDistanceEducationEnrollmentReport2016.pdf

1) Introduction: An Overview of Online Learning

Nearly two-thirds of 270+ ATS schools offer online education.

Over half (55%) of the 260 Commission-accredited schools now have “comprehensive” distance education approval.

Ten years ago less than 10% did.

Notes

This slide focuses on online education among ATS member schools. The number of ATS schools offering online education has grown rapidly since the first two schools were given approval for online offerings in 1999. Just over a decade ago fewer than 20 ATS schools had “comprehensive”* distance education approval. Today more than half do.

*The ATS Board of Commissioners defines “comprehensive” distance education as offering six or more different courses online.
1) Introduction:

An Overview of Online Learning

40+ ATS schools offer degree programs completely (2/3) or almost completely (1/3) online.

Those online programs are approved as exceptions or experiments—allowed in the 2012 revision of the Standards.

Notes

About 140 ATS schools have comprehensive distance education approval (i.e., offering six or more courses online). Of those 140, more than 40 have approval to offer one or more degrees completely or almost completely online—as either exceptions or experiments.* As of 2012, schools may offer academic MA degrees completely or mostly online without needing an exception (about half of the 140 schools do).

*A list of currently approved exceptions and experiments is found under the “Membership” tab on the ATS website (ats.edu).
1) Introduction:
An Overview of Online Learning

Notes
This slide focuses on online student enrollment among ATS member schools. The numbers here come from the ATS Annual Report Forms that member schools submit each fall.

As the chart indicates, more than one-third of all ATS students take at least one course online. That ratio could be one in two by 2020.

*Taking at least one course online

Growth of Online* Enrollment at ATS Schools (2006-2016)

1 in 2 by 2020?
2/3 of ATS schools online
Over half with "comprehensive" distance ed
2) Commission Standards: An Overview

The ATS Commission Standards have three parts:

- General Institutional Standards
- Educational Standard
- Degree Program Standards

These three parts build on each other and should be read as a whole (see next slide)

Notes

This slide provides an overview of the Standards. The ATS Commission on Accrediting is considered a “hybrid” accrediting agency, meaning that it both accredits institutions* and approves individual degree programs. That is one reason for more than one set of standards.

*Free-standing institutions only; ATS Commission accreditation for theological schools embedded in larger institutions relates only to the theological school, not the larger entity.
2) Commission Standards: A Graphic Overview

Standards have 3 parts (but still read together)

- **10 Degree Program Standards** (4 categories)
- **1 Educational Standard** (8 sections) (includes Distance Education Standard)
- **8 General Institutional Standards**
## Notes

This slide shows the eight parts of the Educational Standard, one of which deals with Distance Education. It is one of four educational models or delivery methods, the other three being “campus-based,” “extension,” and “faculty-directed” instruction. The rest of this session will focus on ES.4.

Please remember that while this training session focuses on ES.4, distance education should be evaluated in light of all the Standards, including all applicable parts of the Educational Standard.

### 2) Commission Standards: The Educational Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Education Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ES.1</td>
<td>Degree Programs and Nomenclature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.2</td>
<td>Campus-Based Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.3</td>
<td>Extension Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ES.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>Distance Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.5</td>
<td>Faculty-Directed Individual Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.6</td>
<td>Assessment of Student Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.7</td>
<td>Academic Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES.8</td>
<td>Non-Degree Instructional Programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ATS Commission Website: www.ats.edu

Note: Our Standards are found on our website under “Accrediting”
3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition (ES.4.1)

Our definition of distance education:

“Distance education is a mode of education in which a course is offered without students and instructors being in the same location. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and employs the use of technology. Distance education courses may consist of exclusively online or other technologically assisted instruction or a blend of intensive classroom and online instruction. In all cases, distance education courses shall ensure regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students.”
3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition (ES.4.1)

“Distance education is a mode of education in which a course is offered **without students and instructors being in the same location**…”
Notes

While much of “online” education is delivered “asynchronously” (students and instructors are not all logged in at the same time), our definition of distance education also includes “synchronous,” such as video conferencing (see, for example, the Notes in the previous slide).

“Asynchronous,” however, excludes “correspondence” education (see slide after next slide).

3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition (ES.4.1)

“… Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and employs the use of technology…”
3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition (ES.4.1)

“…Distance education courses may consist of exclusively online or other technologically assisted instruction or a blend of intensive classroom and online instruction…”

Notes

Another word for “blend” in our definition is “hybrid.” This definition assumes that all hybrid courses are a form of distance education, though no minimum percentage of online or onsite delivery is stipulated.

However, section 4.2.19 of this standard does clarify that a hybrid course does not count as meeting a degree program’s residency requirement unless “the majority of instructor-directed learning occurs in situations where both faculty and students are in person on the school’s main campus or at an extension site approved to offer the full degree.”
3) The Standard on Distance Education: Definition (ES.4.1)

“...In all cases, distance education courses shall ensure regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students...”

Notes

Given the ATS core value of a “community of learners,” this focus on “regular and substantive interaction” among faculty and students is crucial. Online courses delivered asynchronously are typically expected to require students and faculty to engage at least weekly, e.g., through online discussion forums.

Online courses that feature “taped lectures” from faculty who do not interact with students would not meet this standard. Evaluators should review online course syllabi to ensure appropriate interaction is required.

As noted earlier, this definition excludes correspondence courses because there is no “regular and substantive interaction” among faculty and students. ES.1.6.2 prohibits ATS schools from offering correspondence courses.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

ES.4.2.1 ... Schools shall demonstrate how programs offered through distance education implement both the institutional and the relevant Degree Program Standard(s).

First, evaluators should review distance education offerings not only in light of the degree program goals of which they are a part, but also in light of the school’s overall mission (Standard 1), as well as other relevant standards (e.g., Standard 8 on institutional resources).
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

ES.4.2.3 According to the relevant Degree Program Standard(s), distance education programs shall seek to enhance personal and spiritual formation, be sensitive to individual learning styles, and recognize diversity within the community of learners.

Notes

Evaluators should look especially at how a school’s distance education offerings address matters of personal and spiritual formation, at least for programs focused on ministerial leadership.

Online courses in such programs cannot be mere “content dumps” that address only intellectual formation. Review syllabi and interview faculty and students to see how such courses address issues of personal and spiritual formation. Some schools, for example, utilize trained local mentors in online students’ own church settings.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

ES.4.2.5 Programs of study and courses for distance education programs shall be established, approved, and reviewed by the regular institutional policies and procedures regarding content, requirements, learning goals, and assessment of student learning.

Notes

Evaluators should review online offerings to ensure that they involve the faculty as whole, rather than being isolated to only a few faculty or primarily to adjuncts.

This does not mean all or even most of the full-time faculty must teach online, but it does mean that online offerings should go through regular approval channels and not be treated as a separate entity with no regular faculty oversight.
ES.4.2.5 Programs of study and courses for distance education programs shall be established, approved, and reviewed by the regular institutional policies and procedures regarding content, requirements, learning goals, and assessment of student learning.

Evaluators should review assessment results for the school’s online offerings to ensure that the learning goals for those courses and the applicable degree program(s) are being achieved.

If a school does not have any assessment results for its online offerings, that may warrant a required report—in consultation with the person evaluating ES.6 on assessment.

(Next three slides show assessment examples)
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Assessment

Education Standard, section ES.6, describes expectations regarding assessment of student learning, including online learning. As described there, assessment efforts should include both direct and indirect measures. The former tend to focus on actual performances (e.g., a sermon preached), while the latter tend to focus on perceptions (e.g., a student satisfaction survey).

Examples of direct measures might include a capstone project, a key course assignment (evaluated through a faculty-developed rubric), or a mentor evaluation of field education experiences. Assessment results that compare online learning with onsite learning may be particularly helpful. Regardless, evaluators should look carefully at how well a school assesses its student learning outcomes for each degree program, including comparative results for different delivery modes.

The next two slides illustrate example of indirect measures.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Assessment

One indirect measure of online education is the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) for schools that use it. Comparing the school’s results to results from all GSQ participants for Table 14 (below) and Table 15 (next slide) may be especially helpful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREAS OF PERSONAL GROWTH (N = 15)</th>
<th>MAJORITY ONLINE</th>
<th>MAIN CAMPUS-TRADITIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm for learning</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for my religious tradition</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for other religious traditions</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy for poor and oppressed</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insight into troubles of others</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in God</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-discipline and focus</td>
<td>4.27 (3rd)</td>
<td>3.97 (7th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to live one's faith in daily life</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of spiritual life</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to become an authority in my field</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern about social justice</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of vocational goals</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to pray</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Assessment

One indirect measure of online education is the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) for schools that use it. Comparing the school’s results to results from all GSQ participants for Table 14 (previous slide) and Table 15 (below) may be especially helpful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2015-16 GSQ Results (5 = highest)</th>
<th>MAJORITY ONLINE</th>
<th>MAIN CAMPUS TRADITIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SKILL AREAS (Top 15 out of 20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to think theologically</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use and interpret scripture</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to relate social issues to faith</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work effectively with men and women</td>
<td><strong>4.11</strong></td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of church doctrine and history</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness/appreciation of global context of ministry</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work effectively in my religious tradition</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Christian philosophy and ethics</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to interact with other cultural/racial/ethnic...</td>
<td><strong>3.97</strong></td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to teach well</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to lead others</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to give spiritual direction</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to preach well</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability in pastoral counseling</td>
<td><strong>3.80</strong></td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to interact with other religious traditions</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes

Evaluators should make sure a school’s online offerings in a given degree meet the residency requirements for that degree.

The MDiv, professional MA, and DMin degree programs allow up to two thirds of the program to be offered online, unless the school has an approved exception to the residency requirement (see earlier slide on exceptions and experiments). Academic MA degree programs have no residency requirement.

4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

ES.4.2.6 Degree programs that include distance education courses shall conform to the residency requirements required by the relevant Degree Program Standard.

NOTE: Advanced academic degrees (ThM/STM and PhD/ThD) normally require all coursework to be completed on campus—unless an exception or experiment is granted. See “Notes” for other degree program residency requirements.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

- **ES.4.2.8** Library and other information resources shall be available in such number and quality as needed to achieve the purposes of the curriculum, and the institution shall demonstrate that students are required to make appropriate use of these resources. Programs shall provide access to librarians and instruction by library staff regarding the selection and use of library resources.

- **ES.4.2.9** When libraries of other institutions are used to meet the needs of distance education programs, the Commission member school shall have written agreements with those libraries to ensure that they offer the functional availability and adequacy of resources, facilities, and librarian support.

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**Notes**

Evaluators should review online course syllabi and interview students and faculty to see how well library resources are used.

The evaluator should also consult with the person reviewing the library standard (4) to see how involved librarians are in online offerings.

Evaluators will want especially to review the availability and use of electronic resources for online students.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

- **ES.4.2.10** *Sufficient technical support services shall ensure that faculty and students are able to focus on their central tasks of teaching and learning. Schools offering distance education courses shall create systems for faculty development to ensure support for course development, training, implementation of the programs, and troubleshooting. Schools shall ensure that students have training and one-on-one technical support for their participation in a distance education program.*

- **ES.4.2.11** *Technological support services should include both (1) staff with a sufficiently high level of technical skills to ensure student facility in handling software and the technological aspects of course offerings and (2) the systemic evaluation and upgrading of technological resources and services consistent with the learning goals of theological scholarship.*

**Notes**

Evaluators should review the adequacy of technological support for online offerings, including training, by interviewing faculty and students.

Evaluators should also interview technology support staff to determine their sufficiency in skills and numbers to support online offerings, as well as to see how well (and often) the technology is evaluated and upgraded.

The most common Learning Management System (LMS) for ATS schools is Moodle, followed by Blackboard and Canvas.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

- **ES.4.2.13** Procedures that govern personnel for the total institution shall be used for selection of faculty in distance education. *Faculty must possess requisite credentials, demonstrate competence appropriate to the specific purposes of these instructional programs, and benefit from institutional practices regarding scholarly development and support for faculty research. Institutions shall provide regular and formal procedures for evaluating faculty engaged in distance education.*

- **ES.4.2.14** The institution’s *full-time faculty shall have significant participation in and responsibility for academic development, teaching, and oversight of distance education*. They shall ensure that the institution’s goals and ethos are evident, the program is rigorous, and the instruction is of a high quality.

### Notes

Evaluators should review credentials for online instructors, including adjunct faculty (see ES.4.2.15). Interviews with faculty teaching online may help determine how well prepared they feel, as well as a review of how the school trains faculty to teach online.

As noted earlier under ES.4.2.5, evaluators should also ensure that the full-time faculty as a whole have appropriate oversight for online offerings, regardless of how many of them teach online.
4) The Standard on Distance Education: Key Issues (ES.4.2)

ES.4.2.18 Students in distance education programs shall have access to appropriate services including advisory and administrative support, technological support, program and vocational counseling, financial aid, academic records, and placement. The policies and procedures governing financial assistance shall be published and administered equitably.

Notes

Evaluators should interview online students to see how well supported they feel regarding essential student services. Distant students should not feel “distant” in terms of appropriate student services support.

Interviews with student services personnel should also indicate how the needs of online students are met.
Schools with online offerings must:

- Verify student identity
- Protect student privacy
- Publish any added student costs

Evaluators should look for things like requiring a password for online students to access courses, and whether the school’s website describes any additional costs for online students.
5) Writing the Report on Distance Education

For guidance on writing an evaluation committee report, please see the Guidelines for Evaluation Committee Reports.

That one-page document is found at the end of the second paragraph under “Evaluation Visits,” which is located in the “Accrediting” tab on the ATS website (ats.edu).

That same webpage has a link to a Sample Evaluation Committee Report, which may be helpful (especially pp. 15-16 on ES.4).

Notes

As noted in other training sessions, a key product of an evaluation visit is the evaluation committee’s report. That report is typically 20+ pages long, with 1-2 pages per standard.

After the visit, you will write a 1-2 page report, describing how well the school’s online offerings meet the Educational Standard on Distance Education (ES.4).
6) Conclusion: Three Things to Remember

- **Remember** before the visit to read the Educational Standard on Distance Education (ES.4), covered in some detail in part 4 of this training session.
- **Remember** also to read before the visit the section of the school’s self-study report on distance education.
- **Remember** at anytime to contact the ATS Commission staff liaison for this visit if you have any questions.
Thank you!