Orientation for New Evaluators: An Overview

ATS Commission on Accrediting
(revised January 2019)
Note: this orientation session is intended to be viewed along with “Orientation for Evaluators: Using the Standards in Evaluation.” Both of these trainings should be completed by new evaluators prior to their first visit.

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.
First, a word of appreciation!

Thank you for your service!
You have been chosen for your expertise and experience.

But even our best efforts need some guidance,
which is what this orientation will attempt to provide
Introduction of Commission

Clarify some terms at the outset of this session:

- **The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS)**
  (more than 275 graduate theological schools in North America)

- **ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA)**
  - Related but separate organization
  - Focused exclusively on accreditation
  - Assigns a staff liaison to each member school
Introduction of Commission

Both ATS and COA are in one building in Pittsburgh
Introduction of Commission

Both ATS and COA have boards

**COA Board of Commissioners:**

- 20 members elected by Commission membership
- 16 to 20 from 250+ accredited member schools
- 3 to 5 are public members (pastors, educators, etc.)

*The Board makes all accreditation decisions; evaluation committees make recommendations*
Commission Staff

Commission staff liaisons:

Debbie Creamer
Lester Ruiz
Tom Tanner
Barbara Mutch
Elsie Miranda

In-house staff:
Christopher The
Joshua Reinders
New Evaluators: An Overview of This Session

1. Begin with the end in mind: **Process of Accreditation**
2. Keep your eye on the prize: **Goal of Accreditation**
3. Follow the map: **Standards of Accreditation**
4. Tools for the trip: **Resources for Accreditation**
5. Journey’s End: **The Visit**

Accreditation is a voluntary process in which peers evaluate educational quality based on published standards.
1) Begin with the end in mind

"End" product of visit
20-page committee report
(1-2 pages per standard)
1) Begin with the end in mind

1. School’s Self Study (Process and Report)

2. Evaluation Committee (Visit and Report)

3. Board of Commissioners (Review and Decision)
1) Begin with the end in mind

Central to accreditation process is evaluation visit:

• Evaluation committee of 3-5 peers, plus staff
• Committees have at least one:
  ▪ Administrator
  ▪ Academic
  ▪ Ministry practitioner
• Each committee member assigned 3-5 standards
• The committee makes recommendations to Board
Goal of Accreditation

COA mission: “improve theological education through accreditation”

We seek to achieve this goal in two ways:

1) **Assure quality** through accountability to standards for the public
2) **Advance quality** through peer review process for the school(s)

At all times, keep your eyes on the prize!
2) Keep your eye on the prize

As a peer reviewer your role is to accompany a school and evaluate it in light of its stated mission

Guided by ATS Commission Standards you serve as peer in a relationship of trust and confidentiality

• Not in light of your own context or beliefs
• Not to police, to prescribe, to judge or to require compliance
2) Keep your eye on the prize

A reminder about conflicts of interest:

- Each committee member will receive a Conflict of Interest Form from the ATS office. This form must be filled out and submitted prior to participation on 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.
2) Keep your eye on the prize

The ATS philosophy of accreditation considers:

– Standards as benchmarks for quality and accountability
– Standards as markers that encourage institutional growth and improvement
– Peer review teams as partners in pursuit of institutional and programmatic excellence

When we accompany one another we get stronger together
3) Follow the map: an overview of the Standards

Standards have 3 parts:
(www.ats.edu/accrediting)

10 Degree Program Standards (4 categories)

1 Educational Standard (8 sections)

8 General Institutional Standards
3) Follow the map: An overview of the Standards

Why so many standards?

ATS Commission:

• Accredits institutions
  (General Institutional Standards)

• Approves programs
  (Educational & Degree Program Standards)
3) Follow the map: An overview of the Standards

Orientation for Evaluators: Using the Standards in Evaluation

ATS Commission on Accrediting (revised December 2015)

Be sure to watch the Commission video on how to use the Standards in institutional evaluation!
3) Follow the map: An overview of the Standards

One Possible “Division of Labor”

1. Purpose, Planning, Evaluation
2. Institutional Integrity
3. Theological Curriculum
4. Library & Information Resources
5. Faculty
6. Student Recruitment, Admissions, Services, and Placement
7. Authority and Governance
8. Institutional Resources

NOTE: Plus Educational Standard and Degree Program Standards (Academics often reviews ES; Academics and Practitioners often review DPS)
4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

Most key documents are found on the ATS Commission Website (www.ats.edu), including:

• General Institutional Standards
• Educational and Degree Program Standards
• Notations (revised February 2014)
• Commission Policies and Procedures
• Self-Study Handbook

(See especially Chapter Four, “Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees,” and Chapter Five, “Guidelines for Using the Standards in Institutional Evaluation”)
4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

These can all be found on the ATS Commission website
Standard 1  Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation

Theological schools are communities of faith and learning guided by a theological vision. Schools related to the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools conduct postbaccalaureate programs for ministerial leadership and in theological disciplines. Their educational programs should continue the heritage of theological scholarship, attend to the religious constituencies served, and respond to the global context of religious service and theological education.

1.1  Purpose

1.1.1  Each Member school shall have a formally adopted statement of institutional purpose. The statement of institutional purpose should articulate the mission to which the school believes it is called and define its particular identity and values. When confessional commitments are central to the identity of a school, they shall be clearly articulated in the statement of purpose. The initiation, development, authorization, and regular review of this statement is the responsibility of the appropriate governing body, and the development should involve all appropriate constituencies (e.g., trustees, faculty, administration, staff, students, and ecclesiastical bodies).

1.1.2  Theological schools that are related to colleges or universities should support the purpose of the overall institution and develop their purpose statements in relationship to the institutions of which they are a part.
ATS Commission Self-Study Handbook:

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK
CHAPTER FOUR
Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees

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4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

Fact Sheet

2-page summary of key stats over 5 years
[statistics on library, faculty, students, finances, program enrollments]
4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

**Targeted Issues Checklist (TIC)**

11 “mandatory requirements” in Standards to evaluate

- 1 of 11 in Standard 1 on Evaluation (1.2.2 → not on TIC)
- 4 of 11 in Standard 2 on Integrity (2.2, 2.3, 2.7, 2.9)
- 5 of 11 in Standard 6 on Students (6.3.1, 6.3.4, 6.3.5, 6.3.8, 6.4.1)
- 1 of 11 in Educational Standard (ES.6.4.4) on public summary of school’s educational effectiveness includes such information as placement rates, completions, etc.

NOTE: Also 3 “mandatory requirements” in Commission Procedures: (VI.D.4 on distance ed, VII.A.4 on advertising visit, X.A.2 on stating accreditation status)
4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

**Self-Study Report Appendix**

(you will receive as a single pdf in advance of the visit)

- organizational chart, with names and titles
- current strategic plan
- assessment plan (instruments and results will be in documents room)
- current budget & 3-5 year budget projections
- most recent FY audit and management letter
- handbooks: board, faculty, staff, student
- academic catalog (or equivalent)

See full list on pp.16-17 of Chapter 3 of Self-Study Handbook)
4) Tools for the trip: Resources for accreditation

Resource Room
(virtual and/or physical room on campus)

- Minutes of board and faculty meetings
- Audited financial statements with management letters
- Planning documents
- Syllabi
- Faculty CV’s
- Sample publications/papers from faculty and students
- Promotional materials
- Assessment instruments and results

(See full list on pp.17-18 of Chapter 3 of Self-Study Handbook)
5) Journey’s End: The Visit

Evaluation committee responsibilities in 3 areas:

1) **Before** the visit:   **Become familiar with Standards**  
   *(found at www.ats.edu under “Accrediting”)*  
   **Review school’s self-study report**  
   *(sent by school 45 days prior to visit)*  
   **Participate in committee conference call**  
   *(led by chair/ATS staff 1-2 weeks before visit,*  
   *to discuss documents, schedule,*  
   *and writing assignments)*
5) Journey’s End: The Visit

Evaluation committee responsibilities in 3 areas:

2) During the visit:  
   - Interview appropriate personnel  
     (schedule usually discussed during conf. call)  
   - Review relevant materials onsite  
     (depends on what areas you are assigned)  
   - Reach consensus on recommendations  
     (typically by end of last full day)
5) Journey’s End: The Visit

Evaluation committee responsibilities in 3 areas:

3) **After** the visit:  **Write a brief report on your areas**
   *(typically 1-2 pages per standard)*
   **Send your section(s) of report to chair**
   *(usually done within one week of visit end)*
   **Review “final” report with all sections**
   *(follow directions by chair on this)*
5) Journey’s End: The Visit

The Committee Report (20-25 pages): Some tips

• Write descriptively, not prescriptively
  (“the school has five faculty,” not “the school has far too few faculty”)

• Identify problems, not people
  (“current business practices do not align with…,” not “the CFO should be fired”)

• Be specific, not general
  (“the MDiv addresses well all four content areas,” not “the MDiv is okay”)

• Say just enough, but not too much/too little
  (write 1-2 pages or so per standard, not 10 words or 10 pages)
5) Journey’s End: The Visit

Six suggestions for the visit:

1. Come prepared (read Self-Study Report, esp. your areas)
2. Stay focused (don’t schedule other things during visit)
3. Listen well (ask open-ended questions; talk infrequently)
4. Don’t debate (evaluate school based on its own mission)
5. Submit report on time (typically have only a few days)
6. Enjoy the work (great time of professional development)
New Evaluators: Session Review

1. *Begin with the end in mind:* Process of Accreditation
2. *Keep your eye on the prize:* Goal of Accreditation
3. *Follow the map:* Standards of Accreditation
4. *Tools for the trip:* Resources for Accreditation
5. *Journey’s End:* The Visit
New Evaluators: Concluding Comments

**Caution**

Evaluate school based on the 
ATS Commission Standards, 
not your own school
New Evaluators: Concluding Comments

Commission’s Purpose

“to enhance and improve theological education through accreditation”

Value of Accreditation is in assuring and advancing quality theological education by and among peers
New Evaluators: Concluding Comments

**Conclusion**

Thank you again for your willingness to serve the Commission in this way—a rewarding experience.
Thank you!