Rationale for New Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation with the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

**Overview:** In January 2020, the Board of Commissioners approved new Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation and for Writing Readiness Reports. Those will become effective in July 2020 after the membership votes in June 2020 on new Standards and Policies and Procedures. The new guidelines are intended to address some long-standing concerns (see rationale below).

Prior to these new guidelines, all schools had to go through the same six steps to achieve initial accreditation: (1) gain ATS Associate Member status by being approved by at least two-thirds of the ATS membership after being recommended by the ATS Board of Directors based upon a formal application, staff visit, and staff report; (2) write a “readiness report” (abbreviated self-study) and host a staff visit to review that report; (3) be granted “candidacy” status by the Board of Commissioners (BOC) based upon the staff visit and report; (4) conduct a full self-study and submit a self-study report to the BOC to decide whether to authorize an initial accreditation visit; (5) host an initial accreditation visit conducted by a peer evaluation committee that writes a report recommending (or not) initial accreditation; and (6) be granted initial accreditation (or not) by the BOC based upon the school's self-study report and the evaluation committee’s report and recommendations.

The new guidelines affect only steps (2) and (3) above; all other steps remain as before. Regarding step (2), the new guidelines allow some schools to skip that step—writing a readiness report and hosting a staff readiness visit—if they hosted a staff visit for Associate Membership within the last 18 months and if they are already accredited by another recognized accreditor. Regarding step (3), the new guidelines eliminate for all schools that step—candidacy status—because all Associate Members (after June 2020) are considered candidates (without that label) for reasons explained below.

**Rationale:**

1. The new guidelines provide our increasingly diverse schools a flexible but rigorous pathway to accreditation. These new procedures are closer to our pre-2004 practice when candidacy (which ATS first used in 1981) was not a separate membership category, but part of a process for Associate Members to become accredited, with some schools granted candidacy when they became Associates.

2. The new guidelines reduce the administrative and financial burden for schools that are prepared to move sooner rather than later towards accredited status, by eliminating the need to write a readiness report and pay for a staff readiness visit, especially since staff would have recently visited those schools as part of the Associate Membership application.

3. The new guidelines recognize the significant change (in ATS’s understanding of what candidacy means) that occurred in 2012, when ATS notified USDE that it would no longer consider candidacy to be a “pre-accredited” status eligible for Title IV financial aid. ATS did so because it grants candidacy based on a staff visit, not a peer review visit (unlike other accreditors) and because ATS’s understanding of what “progress toward accreditation” means for a candidate/pre-accredited school was (and still is) different from what USDE means—and from what other accreditors mean by candidacy. [NOTE: Associate Members have never been and still are not eligible for USDE Title IV financial aid. Candidate Members have not been eligible since 2012. So, these new procedures have no effect on Title IV status.]
4. The new guidelines address the resulting confusion and inequity that occurred with the 2012 change. The confusion comes from ATS using the term candidacy differently than other accreditors use it. The inequity arises from candidate schools having been the only Commission members not required to meet ATS Commission Standards nor follow ATS Commission Procedures, though still eligible to vote on both.

These new procedures also eliminate the discrepancy between the ATS Bylaws (2.1-2), which recognize only two categories of membership—Associate and Full (Accredited), and the Commission Bylaws (2.1-2), which add a third category—Candidate for Accredited Member status), which is why the membership will vote in June 2020 on revisions to Commission Bylaws (see Appendix). In addition, these new procedures reduce the workload not only for many member schools, but also for the Board of Commissioners and for staff, cutting perhaps by 40% the number of readiness reports and visits needed.