

ATS accrediting completes banner year: trends, actions, innovations, and collaborations

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

Amidst a record work load in 2016–17, the Board of Commissioners of the Commission on Accrediting (BOC) and the accrediting staff of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) made forward strides toward improving the process on behalf of the membership. A look back at the year reveals four trends, hundreds of actions, and innovation, including action toward a redevelopment of the accrediting Standards and Procedures and four notable collaborations forged among member schools.



The Board of Commissioners of the Commission on Accrediting met in June at the ATS office in Pittsburgh.

A look at the data on accrediting actions for 2016–17 reveals four significant trends over the past three years:

- **Schools continue to explore innovative ways of engaging in graduate theological education.** The Board of Commissioners approved 22 petitions (out of 96 submitted) for experiments or exceptions this year, bringing the total to nearly 120 such approvals since the revision of the Standards in 2012. Of the 96 petitions, 15 were for residency exceptions, 24 for new degree programs, and 28 for extension sites.
- **Overall, the number of petitions and reports to the Board decreased this year.** Petitions decreased from 120 in 2015, to 140 in 2016, to 96 in 2017. The total number of required reports reviewed by the Board of Commissioners has also seen a slight decline (from 154 in 2015, to 142 in 2016, to 140 this year). Fewer assessment-based actions (down to 28 from 38 in 2015 and 44 in 2016) suggest that schools are improving in that area. There has also been a slight but steady decline in the number of finance-related actions that require Board review (from 34 in 2015, to 30 in 2016, to 29 this year). This is likely a reflection that schools are working hard to overcome continuing financial challenges.
- **The work of accrediting has benefited from an increase in the size of the Board of Commissioners and a trend toward more staff approvals of routine petitions and reports.** Upon a vote by the

membership in June 2016, the Board was increased from 16 to 20 members to handle the growing workload. Staff approvals (more than 100, roughly one-third of all actions) have enabled schools to get responses quickly and efficiently.

- **Accrediting staff and evaluation committee volunteers continue to work on a large number of visits each year.** A total of 55 visits were completed this year (28 of them comprehensive), up from 42 in 2016.

Self-study workshops

Commission staff conducted two workshops to address all elements of the institutional self-study process for member schools anticipating a comprehensive evaluation visit two years hence. The workshops focused on the meaningful work that transpires when a school takes a thoughtful, rigorous look at itself for the sake of mission and education. Upcoming self-study workshops are scheduled for September 14–15, 2017, and March 5–6, 2018.

Redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures

During the 2016–17 year, the Board of Commissioners appointed a Preparatory Committee for the Redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures to develop a proposal for the redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures and to bring a motion for redevelopment to the 2018 Biennial Meeting for a vote of the full membership, accompanied by a proposed work plan.

According to Harry Gardner, chair of the Board of Commissioners, “The Board is fully committed to an inclusive, transparent, consultative, and iterative redevelopment process.”

Only twice in their 80-year history have the Standards undergone a major redevelopment. The last redevelopment, in 1996, was a ground-up approach that required four years of labor-intensive work with widespread input from virtually every member school. Those standards were revised by the membership in 2010–12 to emphasize both rigor and flexibility, through “exceptions and

experiments,” as well as to emphasize the assessment of student learning outcomes.

The 2010–12 revision was intended as a transitional strategy until ATS was ready for what was acknowledged even then as a need for a major redevelopment of the Standards. With changes in the higher education landscape, the increasingly diverse composition of the ATS membership, and the innovation happening at member schools, consensus is growing that the time is right for redevelopment.

According to Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, ATS senior director of accreditation and institutional evaluation, “In their ongoing work with the Board and in their participation in the Educational Models and Practices project, member schools have demonstrated their desire for and commitment to relevance, flexibility, and innovation, as well as to rigor and excellence.”

School for Peer Reviewers

The BOC and staff also developed a curriculum for the first ever “School for Peer Reviewers,” modeled on the popular ATS School for New Deans. Fully funded by ATS, the school will first be offered by invitation in January 2018 and will eventually involve representatives from most ATS member schools. It will be based on 50 years of experience since ATS began regularly requiring an internal self-study process and an external evaluation by a team of peer reviewers every 10 years. Before then, accreditation was basically a “one-and-done” event, with schools essentially granted “accreditation for life” based on an initial checklist of factors completed by one person at the school, which was then reviewed by a single ATS staff member.

School collaborations

The 2016–17 year has also seen a number of new collaborations and mergers among member schools:

- Andover Newton Theological School has affiliated with Yale University Divinity School, which includes a gradual move from its Newton Centre campus to Yale’s New Haven, campus.

- Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) and Union Theological Seminary have signed an agreement that will allow EDS to continue to provide theological education through a collaboration with Union at its campus in New York City.
- The Lutheran Theological School at Gettysburg and the Lutheran Theological School at Philadelphia joined their two historic institutions as United Lutheran Seminary.
- Trinity Lutheran Seminary is in the process of reuniting with Capital University, effective January 1, 2018.
- Other schools are in earlier stages of exploring relocations, mergers, or other partnerships; some have publicly announced their plans (such as Claremont School of Theology, which has begun the due diligence process to explore moving and embedding within Willamette University on its campus in Salem, Oregon), while others are working primarily behind the scenes at this point.

Initial accreditation

Six schools were granted initial accreditation this year:

- B. H. Carroll Theological Institute
- Freed-Hardeman University
Graduate School of Theology
- Georgia Christian University School of Divinity
- Grace School of Theology
- Holy Apostles College and Seminary
- Neal T. Jones Seminary
of Washington University of Virginia



[Eliza Smith Brown](#) is Director of Communications and External Relations at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.