

ATS announces first School for Peer Reviewers

By TOM TANNER

The Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) will host a new School for Peer Reviewers—modeled on the very popular School for New Deans that began a few years ago—January 18–19, 2018, at its Pittsburgh offices. While this inaugural event is by invitation only, the Commission hopes it will be the first of many that will eventually involve representatives from most ATS member schools. It seems especially fitting that the first-ever School for Peer Reviewers will occur in the Association’s centennial year.



In his 2008 history of ATS, *A Community of Conversation*, Glenn Miller observed that one of the most significant milestones in the Association’s 100-year history did not occur until the mid-1960s. While ATS had been accrediting schools since 1938, it was not until the 1960s that it began regularly requiring two things that are now quite common: (1) that each member school undergo an *internal* self-study process at least every 10 years and (2) that a group of *external* peer reviewers visit a school after its self-study was completed to evaluate its educational quality. Before then, accreditation was basically done on a “one-and-done” basis. Schools were essentially granted “accreditation for life,” based on an initial checklist of factors completed typically by only one person at the school that was then reviewed by a single ATS staff member.

Miller observed that when ATS began routinely requiring self-studies and peer reviews in the mid-1960s (initially

proposed in 1956), it “created, both in theory and often in practice, a community of improvement.”¹ He concluded that not only did the self-study process elevate the level of conversation about quality theological education internally within member schools as their faculty and staff engaged in self-study, but it also elevated the level of conversation externally across member schools with the use of peer reviewers. “As the visiting teams crossed the continent . . . [they created] a broader and better-networked community of theological educators.”

Overall purpose

In keeping with that long tradition, the Commission hopes the School for Peer Reviewers will help create “a broader and better-networked community of theological educators.” While ATS has hosted a self-study workshop

¹ Glenn Miller, *A Community of Conversation: A Retrospective of The Association of Theological Schools and Ninety Years of North American Theological Education* (Pittsburgh, PA: The Association of Theological Schools, 2008), 14.

for decades for schools beginning the internal self-study process, it has not had a counterpart for external reviewers who serve those schools on accreditation visits. To be sure, we have had online training opportunities for many

The work of accrediting simply could not be done without the hundreds of these volunteers who give scores of hours each year in this important service.

years, but this new School for Peer Reviewers will be the first opportunity to bring together a small, select group of evaluators for face-to-face networking and more personal training. The work of accrediting simply could not be done without the hundreds of these volunteers who give scores of hours each year in this important service. This is also a way of both thanking these volunteers and helping them serve more effectively. Consequently, the School for Peer Reviewers will be fully funded by ATS with no cost to the participants. For this inaugural event, the ATS Commission staff has compiled a broadly representative list of people to invite. Anyone interested in participating in a future School for Peer Reviewers is encouraged to contact the ATS Commission staff.

Personal touch

To keep this School for Peer Reviewers as personal and interactive as possible, participation is limited to about 25 people, ranging from those who are about to do their very first accreditation visits to those who have done a half dozen or more visits. The Commission thinks this mix of new and experienced reviewers will help build a more cohesive “community of improvement,” and for participants, hopefully this experience is as much about peer learning from others as it is about hearing from ATS staff. Assuming this pilot School goes well, the Commission plans to repeat it twice every year—once in the fall and once in the spring—all at no cost to the participants with travel, lodging, and food covered by ATS.

Goals

The primary goals the Commission hopes to accomplish with its School for Peer Reviewers are six-fold:

1. To help peer reviewers better understand the ATS Commission on Accrediting and its focus on quality improvement, public accountability, and the peer review process, as well as the importance of professional and personal attention in accreditation
2. To review expectations for evaluation visits, including how to prepare for the visit, what questions to ask during the visit, and how to approach writing assignments after the visit
3. To highlight key aspects of the Commission Standards of Accreditation, including case studies where interpretation is needed, as well as feedback regarding possible new standards
4. To review expectations for evaluation committee reports, including emerging issues and concerns
5. To (re)introduce helpful resources available from the ATS Commission, including the various roles played by key ATS staff
6. To provide opportunities for participants to interact with other peer reviewers—both new and experienced—regarding expectations, experiences, and questions related to accreditation visits

Future impact

Beginning the School for Peer Reviewers this year does seem timely—not only because this is the Association’s centennial year, but also because we are anticipating a major redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation in the next several years, pending authorization from the membership at the June 2018 Biennial Meeting in Denver. As we prepare for that

redevelopment project, it is even more important to have in place a variety of training opportunities that will allow our volunteer core of peer reviewers to become familiar with our current standards and with new ones later. While we will keep our online training modules, we think adding a School for Peer Reviewers as often as twice a year for about 25 participants at a time could, over the course of the next several years, allow us to interact in person with representatives from most of our member schools. In the process, this event could go a long way toward helping develop a new generation of peer reviewers who better understand the Association's personal approach to accreditation—an approach under increasing bureaucratic challenges. And hopefully we can continue to fulfill Miller's earlier observation: "the creation of a broader and better-networked community of theological educators."



[Tom Tanner](#) is Director, Accreditation and Institutional Evaluation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.