

Director shares six things to know about ATS accreditation

By TOM TANNER

In my travels for ATS, whenever a seat mate on an airplane asks me what I do for a living, telling them I work in accreditation invariably invites a second question: “What is accreditation?” It’s a fair question with no easy answers.

The work of accreditation can be confusing to many, as even the term seems strange. It reminds me of when I first became an academic dean, and our young daughter asked, “Dad, what does an *acrobatic dean* do?” While deaning and accrediting can sometimes feel like jumping through hoops or juggling balls, the work of accreditation is so much more. This article attempts to describe the “so much more” by addressing six things you may not know about ATS accreditation.¹

1 *ATS accreditation focuses on mission and students.*

While accreditation can serve many functions, it primarily serves two ends: to assure the public (especially member schools’ various constituencies) that a school offers a quality education to students and to help each member school better achieve its educational mission. That focus on mission is why the very first standard for virtually every accrediting agency is about mission. The school’s mission is the benchmark against which is measured every aspect of a school. And for an ATS school, mission always emphasizes student learning and formation. As stated in Standard 3 of the [ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation](#), overwhelmingly adopted



by the membership in June 2020: “Theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation. Consistent with their missions and religious identities, theological schools give appropriate attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation.” The heart and soul of ATS accreditation is holding schools accountable to—and helping them fulfill—their educational missions, especially regarding student learning and formation.

2 *ATS accreditation is private and voluntary.*

While accreditation is a global enterprise that is mandated and maintained mostly by federal governments, accreditation in North America is a private, voluntary process. The US Department of Education (USDE) does not accredit any schools, nor does Canada have a federal department of education. Rather, private accrediting agencies in the US can choose to be recognized by the USDE, which allows students at schools accredited by those agencies to receive federal funds in the form of

¹ “ATS accreditation” is shorthand for being accredited by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools, as the Commission and the Association are two related but separate corporations. For more information, see [Overview of Accrediting](#) and [FAQs about Accreditation](#) on the ATS website.

grants and loans (though doing so invokes various federal regulations for the schools and the accreditors). Accreditation in Canada is handled primarily at the provincial level through “quality assurance” processes, though many private voluntary professional accrediting agencies also operate in that country. Generally speaking, no school in North America is required to be accredited nor required to be accredited by a particular agency (there are nearly 90 accreditors in the US alone, primarily categorized as either institutional or programmatic—ATS is both).² That said, being accredited not only provides a public “seal of approval” but enables many ATS students to access public funds that make graduate theological education affordable. And, while North American accreditation is private, it provides a public good by publishing a list of all accredited schools and any conditions imposed upon those schools (see [ATS Membership Directory](#)).

3 *ATS accreditation is a peer-driven process.*

The genius of North American accreditation is that it is a peer-driven process—that is especially true for ATS accreditation. While ATS has a [staff of seven](#) who work primarily in accrediting, the crux of accreditation is done by volunteers from peer schools and from peer ministry organizations. ATS has more than 500 experienced volunteers who form a corps of accrediting peers, including not only faculty and staff at ATS schools but also other volunteers such as pastors, priests, denominational leaders, and directors of nonprofit organizations. All are trained in the work of accreditation, and all are screened for any conflicts of interest. These peers are the front-line workers who make accreditation work. In any given year, more than 120 of them do the good, hard work of accreditation by reading reports, visiting schools, and serving on the ATS Board of Commissioners.

4 *ATS accreditation has three key components.*

The three things just mentioned constitute three key components of ATS accreditation, and virtually all other types of accreditation: a self-study report, a self-study visit, and accreditation decisions about the self-study report and visit made by a representative group of commissioners. The self-study report is written by a school to document how well it is achieving its mission in light of accrediting standards, highlighting strengths and areas needing improvement. The self-study visit involves three to five peers and public members (e.g., pastors and other church leaders) who read the school’s self-study report and then spend three or four days on campus interviewing everyone from trustees to alumni/ae to see how accurately the school’s self-study report reflects reality. The visit concludes with a committee report describing how well the school meets the ATS Standards and making recommendations regarding areas of strength to be celebrated and areas of concern to be addressed. Accreditation decisions about self-study visits, as well as decisions about reports and petitions for substantive changes (e.g., requests for new degrees) are made by a 20-member ATS Board of Commissioners, elected by the membership every two years and composed of peer and public members.

5 *ATS accreditation is personal and pastoral.*

Perhaps the greatest distinctive of ATS accreditation is that this work is personal and pastoral. ATS is one of the few accrediting agencies that send staff on every comprehensive visit, helping visiting committees do their work well and serving as a resource to the schools being visited. Each ATS school is assigned a Commission staff

² New USDE regulations, effective July 2020, categorize US accrediting agencies as either institutional or programmatic. USDE no longer uses the term “regional” accreditor, and the new regulations allow those agencies to accredit schools “outside their region,” several of which have announced plans to do that.

liaison who gets to know that school very well—coaching, consulting, counseling, and serving as confidant to each school on an individual basis. Staffing accreditation visits accounts for less than a quarter of what staff do; most staff time is spent responding individually to emails, phone calls, and Zoom calls about specific issues raised by “their” schools. To do this work, Commission staff draw upon nearly a century of experience in theological accreditation. They are here to serve the schools, which sometimes also means having hard conversations. Still, the goal of ATS accreditation is not to play “gotcha” but to say, “How can we help you?” After all, the Commission’s purpose is “to contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through accreditation.”

6 *ATS accreditation reflects three important values: community, accountability, and flexibility.*

Community: ATS is the only accrediting agency in North America focused exclusively on graduate theological education. So, being accredited by ATS means being part of a community of people who, while quite diverse, still have very similar interests and goals—and access to special expertise that cannot be found elsewhere.

Accountability: Accreditation is an ongoing relationship between member schools and ATS; each school’s assigned Commission staff liaison serves its school as an

ongoing accountability partner, helping it as it considers new degrees, new delivery methods, new organizational models, and other ways to enhance its mission. *Flexibility:* The new ATS Standards (approved by a membership vote of 198 to 1 in June 2020) give schools considerable flexibility in finding ways to best achieve their educational missions, with an emphasis on each school’s distinctive context and constituencies. That emphasis is increasingly important given the growing diversities represented in our membership. Toward that end, the new standards reframe accreditation from following a set of prescribed practices to exploring principles of quality in different and innovative ways. That reframing is a paradigm shift in the work of accreditation in that ATS accreditation no longer requires every school to “walk the same path,” but rather to “use the same compass.” Schools may take different paths but are all heading in the same general direction—toward “the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public” (from the ATS mission statement).

So, what is ATS accreditation? It is a rich and rewarding community of accountability and flexibility where peers help one another achieve their distinctive missions and ensure educational quality for their students and for the public. It is good work. It is godly work. It is our work together as communities of faith and learning.



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