

Reflective guide to effective evaluation now available

BY DEBBIE CREAMER

At its June 2021 meeting, the ATS Board of Commissioners adopted a new resource to help ATS schools with the important (yet often challenging) task of evaluation—A Reflective Guide to Effective Evaluation for Theological Schools.



The approval of the 2020 *Standards of Accreditation*—and, particularly, the shift in emphasis from assessment (of student learning) to evaluation (of educational and institutional outcomes)—necessitated an update to the earlier *Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment of Student Learning* (adopted as a Commission document in 2014). This new document preserves much of the content, style, and approach from the earlier guide but has been updated in the following ways:

- Reframed the scope to attend to evaluation broadly rather than just focusing on assessment of student learning (sometimes talking about evaluation in general, sometimes talking about both institutional evaluation and evaluation of student learning). The final chapter focuses primarily on student learning, as this has been a key challenge for many member schools.
- Rewrote all references to the *Standards* so they align with the 2020 *Standards of Accreditation* and related materials (including the self-study ideas and the new *Self-Study Handbook*), and revised the text so it aligns with the spirit of the new *Standards* and other key Commission documents.

- Reorganized the document from six chapters (plus a preface and introduction) to three chapters (plus an introduction), organized around philosophy (why), process (how), and practices (what). This reorganization seeks to make the document easier to use and aligns with the approach of the new *Standards*, particularly the way they attend to principles more than just practices.
- Retained the focus from the earlier reflective guide—and from the *Standards* themselves—that evaluation is part of our common commitment to continuous improvement, not a bureaucratic requirement for compliance. It also affirms that evaluation can (and should) be a process that is “simple, systematic, and sustained”—and perhaps even fun, or at least interesting and useful.

The title of the document also summarizes its commitments and goals:

- A **Reflective** guide because it is more than just a fact-based set of instructions for doing evaluation. Rather, it contains practical and personal reflections

regarding perceptions and practices of evaluation. As such, it is less formal than other documents produced for the Commission on Accrediting, using, for example, the editorial “we” throughout. This more personal approach is intentional towards the goal of making evaluation more understandable to a wide range of constituents, including administrators, staff, faculty, and trustees.

- A reflective **Guide** because it is intended as just that—“a guide” to effective evaluation, not as “the guide” or as “the only way” to do evaluation. The *ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation*—not this guide—constitute the final word on evaluation for member schools. There are many good ways to engage evaluation, and not all of them are or can be included in this document. Still, schools that review this guide, based on those *Standards*, should be well positioned to meet the expectations on evaluation of the ATS Board of Commissioners.
- To **Effective Evaluation** because, while this guide does not (nor cannot) encapsulate every ideal of evaluation, it is based on good practices of evaluation recognized by the ATS Board of Commissioners to be effective, and it is founded on the *ATS Commission Standards* that frame and inform those best practices. This includes *Standard 2 (Planning and Evaluation)* but is not limited to *Standard 2*; evaluation is a theme woven throughout all the *Standards*, is part of the guiding principles on which the *Standards* are built, and is central to the idea of accreditation as quality assurance and quality improvement.
- For **Theological Schools** because this guide focuses on the work of evaluation from the perspective of the theological school as a whole. This includes three interrelated assumptions.

This more personal approach is intentional towards the goal of making evaluation more understandable to a wide range of constituents, including administrators, staff, faculty, and trustees.

1. Evaluation is not just the responsibility of a single role or department (e.g., office of institutional effectiveness, assessment coordinator, academic dean), but rather should be engaged by a wide range of stakeholders (including faculty, trustees, and administrators, among others). This guide will likely be helpful to those who have the word “evaluation” or “assessment” in their titles, but it is intentionally not written only for them.
2. While evaluation can and should happen at a number of different levels (from small to large), this guide focuses primarily on the sorts of evaluation that help a school understand how well it is fulfilling its mission, with particular attention on students—“how well they are learning and how that learning helps them achieve appropriate personal and vocational goals” (*Standard 2.8*). This guide will likely be useful to those involved in any sort of evaluation process, but it is particularly focused on how evaluation serves a school’s mission.
3. While evaluation is a helpful skill in almost any situation or process, this guide focuses primarily on evaluation for graduate theological schools. It leans into the depth of mission that is often grounded in faithfulness to a theological tradition and community, while also recognizing the organizational structures and institutional commitments that are part and parcel of graduate theological education. Some aspects of this guide might be helpful in other contexts—including that evaluation and assessment are useful skills for students to learn—but the focus is intentionally on evaluation in graduate

theological schools, and particularly those that are seeking to hold themselves accountable to the *ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation*.

In addition to this guide, the Commission provides a variety of resources to help schools with evaluation. Schools engaging in evaluation as part of the self-study process should review the *Self-Study Handbook*. Other resources are available on the ATS website—the section on [self-study and evaluation](#) and the [resources for evaluation and assessment coordinators](#) may be particularly relevant for schools developing or enhancing their evaluation plans, and the resources on [student data](#), [institutional data](#), and [data visualization](#) can be great supports for data collection and interpretation.

The Commission makes a variety of educational and interpretive resources available to assist member schools,

including workshops and online training resources related to evaluation, assessment, and data (watch for more of these coming this fall!). [Engage ATS](#) includes a community space specifically for assessment coordinators to share wisdom and provide mutual support. And, of course, schools are reminded to be in conversation the *Standards of Accreditation* themselves, including the *Preface*, the *Educational Principles* (found in the *Self-Study Handbook*, p. 5–7), and in the *Self-Study Ideas*.

Finally, each school is assigned a Commission staff liaison to support it in its work; your staff liaison would be pleased to be a conversation partner with you as you engage this significant work.



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