New training to be used by ATS accreditation visitors

By Debbie Creamer

As the work on the redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures continues to move forward toward the membership vote at the June 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in Vancouver—including the February 10, 2020 release of the second set of public drafts of the proposed Commission Standards (text-only version and annotated version) and the proposed Policies and Procedures (annotated version)—the ATS Board of Commissioners and Commission staff are developing strategies to support schools through the transition to new Standards and Policies.

As described in an earlier issue of *Colloquy Online*, the board is in the midst of a major revision of the *Self-Study Handbook*, which should be available by late spring. Updates have already been made to the Commission's *Self-Study Workshop* and its *School for Peer Reviewers* to help participants transition from the current *Standards* to the new ones.

During its January 2020 meeting, the board adopted Grandfathering Procedures for how the new *Standards* and *Policies and Procedures* will be implemented, if approved at the biennial meeting, including how these will impact schools engaged in the self-study process as well as those who need to submit reports and petitions or respond to notations. Recognizing that one of the significant themes from the membership during the redevelopment's "year of listening" was a strong desire for a simpler, clearer set of *Standards* and *Policies* that focus on educational quality and contextual flexibility while streamlining many accreditation processes, the board has

also voted to eliminate all petition fees if new *Standards* and *Policies* are adopted by the membership in June 2020 (i.e., effective for all petitions submitted July 1, 2020, or later).

Another important area receiving significant attention is the education and support provided to members of evaluation committees. As noted in the Preamble to the *Standards*, "these [proposed] standards articulate *principles of quality for graduate theological education that all schools meet in various ways*," where *in various ways* "means each school has flexibility in how it meets them, which reflects a clear commitment in these standards to contextualized accountability."

This focus on educational principles rather than on delineated practices, and on contextualized accountability rather than on an abstract norm against which all schools are measured, means that volunteers who serve on accreditation committees will need not only to know the *content* of the new *Standards* but also will need to

understand how to *interpret* those *Standards* across the vast diversity of our schools.

While the timeline for the redevelopment adds an urgency for updating our visitor education process (given that every committee member will need to be fluent in the new *Standards* by fall 2020), it is also a perfect opportunity to think pedagogically, not just about content delivery or transmission of information but also with attention to the formation and cultivation of the visiting committee as a community of learning.

Accreditation visitors are always selected in light of their skills, wisdom, and experience—not just in general, but in light of the needs and context of the school being visited. And they always receive direct and personalized support by the ATS liaison who is staffing the visit. Presently, before serving on an evaluation committee, each visitor is also expected to watch a series of hour-long videos (narrated PowerPoint training sessions) to prepare them for any new role on an evaluation committee (e.g., chair, distance education evaluator, new visitor, focused visitor). Some visitors also participate in the Commission's annual *School for Peer Reviewers*. While this model is an improvement from earlier Commission strategies for visitor education (e.g., multi-hour webinars), it also has a number of disadvantages (poorly organized, repetitive, inconsistent results, difficult to track, time-consuming to update).

With the anticipated adoption of new Commission *Standards* in June 2020, every visitor (more than 150 per year) will need to be reoriented to their work. Given that accrediting visits are, themselves, a "hybrid" sort of experience (a short and intense period of time on campus, with pre-work and post-work away from campus), it seemed an ideal time to take fuller advantage of technology to support this sort of learning.

Beginning in spring 2018, with the assistance of an online learning consultant, Commission staff have engaged in a series of pilot projects using a learning management system (LMS) to support accreditation visits—not only to provide visitor training materials but also to organize all documents, discussions, and work of the evaluation committee.

The results of these pilots were overwhelmingly positive. Visitors remarked, for example, that they found the LMS's organizational structure incredibly helpful (rather than having to sort through countless emails and documents). They also appreciated being able to engage one another in online forums before and after the visit (becoming more of a "learning community" rather than just a committee that meets together for one conference call and a few days on site). In addition, they appreciated the chance to experience good online design and to learn things they could bring back to their own educational programs.

The "pilot" visitors said they could not imagine going back to the "old way" of preparing for visits. Commission staff observed that these visitors were exceptionally well prepared for the site visit and that their recommendations and reports were of consistently high quality—observations with which the host schools and the Board of Commissioners concurred.

Beginning in spring 2020, all comprehensive evaluation committees will be using Canvas as a resource hub where they can find all documents, training resources, and other materials related to their visits.

Based on this successful 18-month experiment, and with the support of both the Board of Commissioners and the Board of Directors, ATS has made a long-term investment in Canvas (a learning management system familiar to many of our schools, with features similar to other learning management systems, like Blackboard and Moodle) to continue this work. Beginning in spring 2020, all comprehensive evaluation committees will be using Canvas as a resource hub where they can find all documents, training resources, and other materials related to their visits.

This summer, after the membership vote, Canvas will serve as the foundation for replacing static visitor training resources with engaged learning models that not only

The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110
T: 412-788-6505 • F: 412-788-6510 • www.ats.edu

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align with the new *Standards* but also equip accreditation visitors to evaluate schools fairly, skillfully, and with attention to contextualized accountability. The full rollout in fall 2020 will include a wide range of features to support and enhance visits, including document organization, integrated training, just-in-time resources, facilitation of communication among committee members, and developing the visiting committee as a "community of learning."

While "updating visitor education resources" may seem like a small task, those who have offered feedback throughout the redevelopment process have affirmed it to be a significant one. Volunteers regularly refer to service on an evaluation committee as one of the best professional development experiences they have ever had. While this speaks to the current value of committee service, it also challenges ATS to invest in this type of leadership education with our best resources.

On the other hand, we are aware that uneven visitor preparation is one of our biggest risks in the peer-evaluation process—something that will only increase with the new *Standards*, which also challenges us to invest our best efforts in the education process. We also know that evaluation visitors (intentionally or not) carry what they have learned from evaluation visits back to their home campuses or other institutions. Consequently, given that our visitors represent a large proportion of our member schools and that a majority of our schools are using some sort of online or hybrid pedagogy, the chance for ATS to model good online instructional design is a significant opportunity to be of service to our schools and to the students they seek to serve.

We are excited by this opportunity to build on the Commission's distinctive approach to accreditation as "a community of conversation" (the title of Glenn Miller's 2008 book about the history of ATS) to live into today's landscape as "hybrid communities of learning" that embody the Commission's mission to "contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through accreditation" (Commission Bylaws, 1.2).

Debbie Creamer *is Senior Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

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