

# "Blown away by the wisdom in the room"—ATS School for Peer Reviewers benefits new and experienced evaluators

By TOM TANNER

*"I was blown away by the wisdom in the room and how much I learned," said a participant describing the inaugural ATS School for Peer Reviewers held last January. The second—and now annual—event, held earlier this month at the ATS office in Pittsburgh, received just as much praise as the first.*

Modeled after the ATS School for New Deans, the School for Peer Reviewers invites up to 30 peers from across the ATS membership to learn from one another and from ATS staff how to be a more effective peer reviewer on ATS accreditation visits.

The event's agenda focused on the Association's approach to accreditation (helping schools better achieve their missions), expectations for accreditation visits (the collaborative nature of peer review), interpreting key standards in specific contexts (through small group case studies and plenary discussions), guidelines for writing evaluation committee reports (best and worst practices), and an open conversation about how to do this work better.

Like last year, this year's event involved both new and experienced evaluators in fairly equal numbers. They represented well the ATS membership in terms of nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, and ecclesial traditions.

Participants at this year's event introduced themselves by stating why they volunteer to do this work.



"It adds value to what I do as a theological educator."

"It helps my school when I learn what other schools are doing."

"I am compelled by collaborative work."

"The rich, deep conversations during the visit are worth all the work."

"It helps me live out 'do unto others' by evaluating schools in ways that I would want my school to be evaluated."

"My first visit was like walking into a hall of mirrors, where I recognized my own school but saw certain features exaggerated in ways that I wouldn't have otherwise noticed."

"Evaluating other schools reminds me of the line from Emerson: 'A man standing in his own field is unable to see it.'"

A participant from last year's event summarized the work: "This is sacred work. Schools invite us into their innermost places, and we must walk in with humility and with a sense of the holy."

Each year, the ATS Commission on Accrediting conducts about 50 accreditation visits (30 comprehensive and 20 focused) involving more than 150 peer reviewers, including "ministry practitioners" (e.g., pastors, priests, and denominational leaders). While ATS has provided online training materials for peer reviewers for many years, the School for Peer Reviewers is the first in-person event since the ATS Commission Standards were implemented in 1938.

The work of accreditation simply could not be done without the help of these peer reviewer volunteers. A peer reviewer's work typically requires as much as 80 hours of time per visitor per visit, counting the preparation before the visit, the four days during the visit, and

the work after the visit—all done at no pay. The School for Peer Reviewers provides the opportunity not only to improve this work, but also to thank in person those who do this work so freely and so graciously. (Participants' expenses for this event are provided by ATS.)

One of the event's goals is to prepare a new generation of peer reviewers who will be working with a new set of standards in the next few years. Peer review has as critical a place in accreditation as the standards have.

In his 2008 history of ATS, *A Community of Conversation*, Glenn Miller called attention to the vital role of the peer-review process. Crossing the continent on these visits, "peer reviewers," he wrote, "created a broader and better-networked community of theological educators."

When these peer reviewers gather each January, one can indeed be "blown away by the wisdom in the room."

*"This is sacred work. Schools invite us into their innermost places, and we must walk in with humility and with a sense of the holy."*

—School for Peer Reviewers attendee



Tom Tanner is Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He also serves as the ATS commission staff liaison for the redevelopment process.