

Each ATS accreditor brings something different to the table . . . even cookies!

By LISA KERN

Thirty-six participants from 20 ATS member schools attended the ATS Commission on Accrediting Self-Study Workshop, September 15 and 16, at the ATS offices in Pittsburgh. This free event is offered to assist schools—with visits scheduled in the next two to three years—on how to begin the self-study process. There are four directors of accreditation and institutional evaluation on the ATS staff: Debbie Creamer, Barbara Mutch, Lester Ruiz, and Tom Tanner. In addition to each of them traveling to nearly 10 member schools every year for comprehensive or initial accrediting visits, “the baker,” “the poet,” “the dancer,” and “the builder” emerged at the recent workshop to present different topics associated with the self-study process.

Serving as host, Mutch provided the welcome and introductions and presented an overview of the self-study process to begin the workshop. A pastor and former professor of homiletics, she is a lover of poetry and words and has been described as one who “combines the literary with the biblical” in her talks.

“Poetry is one of the best ways I know to think about what matters and to cooperate with the Spirit of God who is working to make all things new,” said Mutch. “The word ‘poetry’ has to do with ‘making.’ Poems don’t give us more information . . . they make something in us. They require us to move more slowly to really see and hear what’s happening in the poem, which is a good thing. They have the capacity to build something in our interior lives that wasn’t there before—joy, attentiveness,

wonder, gratitude . . . that’s why God’s best words to God’s people through the prophets were always poetry.”

Mutch opened her presentation with “. . . the only way to serve the community is to forget the community and serve the work”—part of a quote from Dorothy Sayers, renowned English crime writer, poet, playwright, essayist, translator, and Christian humanist.

“I love to build things . . . my original dream was to be an engineer,” said Tanner.

He presented a session on how to organize for the self-study process and another on how to write an effective self-study report. For the latter—and seemingly appropriate for one who likes to work with his hands—Tanner uses an image of a palm with widespread fingers throughout his presentation. Each finger represents one of the five characteristics of a good self-study report.

“I always wanted to build highways and bridges, but God intervened . . . I like to think that I’m still doing that in some ways with my present work,” he said.

Creamer was responsible for reviewing how the accrediting standards are related to educational assessment and how a school can use data to demonstrate institutional effectiveness and to identify areas for improvement.

“We often hear our member schools simply tell us what people think, but we need them to show us,” she said. “It’s one thing for me to say that I make great cookies, but it’s more interesting (and fun!) if you actually get to taste my cookies,” she explained a few years ago during one of her presentations.

An idea was born.

"I've discovered that serving my homemade cookies during my presentation is one of the best ways to teach about assessment, and it makes a nice distraction in the middle of what could be perceived as a dull topic!"

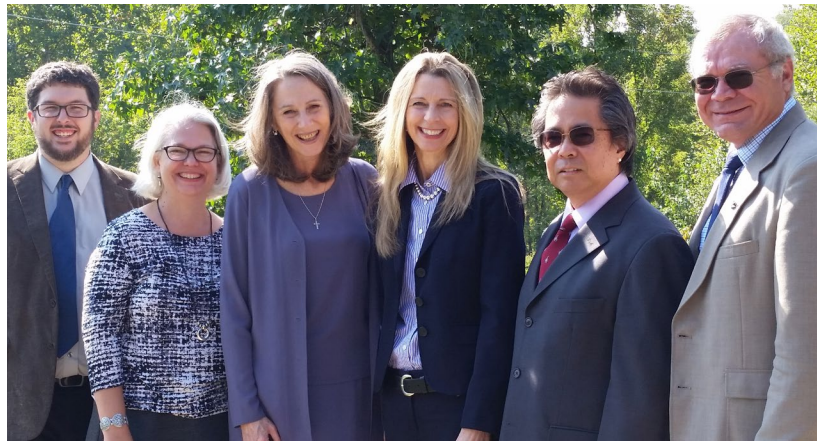
Dancing Our Way to Educational Transformation served as the theme for Ruiz's talk on the accreditation standards and the Commission's procedures and roles.

"My wife, Jean, and I started dancing in the 1990s. We took it on in a very serious way, taking private lessons and having several professional competition-level dance coaches. We never did compete, but did a considerable amount of showcase performances," said Ruiz. "Dancing is about technique, about art, about working together, about performance and excellence, and about long hard work. It is also highly 'interactive'—not just between the partners but also between the dancers and the audience, and between the dancers and their 'environment.'"

"Dance is also about rhythm and timing," said Ruiz. "All these elements are also characteristics of self-study processes, even accreditation."

Lori Neff LaRue, director of accreditation services for ATS, presented a session titled "Accountability to the Larger Public" where she reviewed a number of key expectations directly related to the self-study process including the Targeted Issues Checklist, the Educational Effectiveness Statement, and USDE regulations for applicable schools.

"In light of the rapidly changing landscape in higher education and increased emphasis on institutional



L-R, Joshua Reinders, Debbie Creamer, Barbara Mutch, Lori Neff LaRue, Lester Ruiz, Tom Tanner

accountability, it is important for schools to be able to articulate well the educational and formational outcomes for their degree programs and to make that information accessible to the broader public," she said.

Joshua Reinders, administrative assistant for accrediting, handled the workshop registration process as well as hotel and travel logistics for participants.

This is the first academic year in more than a decade that ATS is offering a second self-study workshop—to be held February 27 and 28, 2017—and the first year that the workshop was held at the ATS office rather than in a hotel conference room.

"I like that we've switched the location to our building," said Creamer. "It gives attendees a chance to visit the ATS offices (which, at their core, belong to the member schools themselves), to have richer conversations with one another and with more of our staff (who are here to support the work of our schools), and to experience a bit of the hospitality and service that is so central to all of our efforts here."



[Lisa Kern](#) is Coordinator, Communications and External Relations for The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh.