THE ASSOCIATION OF
THEOLOGICAL
SCHOOLS
THE COMMISSION ON ACCREDITING
The mission of ATS is to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public. Stronger theological schools are better equipped to train and prepare leaders for the church. The Association and Commission on Accrediting employ several key strategies to support and strengthen theological schools in service to communities of faith.
Communities of Faith and Learning Guided by a Theological Vision

Theological schools educate leaders for the church as well as scholars and teachers of the theological disciplines. These schools differ from one another in deep and significant ways, but through their membership in The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), they demonstrate a commitment to commonly held values about what constitutes good theological education.
COMMUNITIES OF FAITH AND LEARNING
GUIDED BY A THEOLOGICAL VISION
More than 250 graduate schools of theology in the United States and Canada form the Association, currently representing the broad spectrum of religious practice and theological commitment present in North American Christianity. Arguably constituting the most ecumenical organization in North America, the ATS member schools represent mainstream Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, and Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Together they enroll approximately 71,000 students and employ more than 3,600 full-time faculty. As higher education institutions, they are relatively small, even when compared with private liberal arts colleges. The median ATS school enrolls 181 students, employs eleven faculty members, has 105,000 library holdings, and holds long-term investments of approximately $7 million. Yet despite their small size, they have all the complexities of higher education institutions more generally: the ongoing need for funds development, physical plant maintenance, technological infrastructure, educational and institutional assessment, regulatory affairs, and more.
This community of schools finds common ground within ATS where theological educators can meet, discuss the challenges and rewards of their work, exchange ideas, and share best practices. The Association met for the first time in 1918 to consider the needs of the churches and their ministries near the close of the First World War. It has met biennially since that time around its common purposes:

> to provide quality education for the future leaders of the church,
> to develop scholars and teachers for the church and the academy, and
> to serve as a resource for communities of faith and the wider public.

ATS member schools that meet the standards of accreditation become members of the Commission on Accrediting of ATS.
Accreditation is a North American practice of peer review and accountability to mutually agreed-upon standards of quality. In theological education, those standards support the overarching goal of the enterprise: the development of theological understanding through reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Accreditation affords the public the assurance of a standard of institutional and educational quality and provides schools with a process for continual improvement. Students have the added benefit of being able to transfer credits among accredited schools and, in the United States, to receive federally guaranteed student loans.

The ATS Commission on Accrediting is recognized in the United States by the U.S. Department of Education and the nongovernmental Council for Higher Education Accreditation for the accreditation of graduate theological schools. The Board of Commissioners of the Commission on Accrediting also relates to the regional accrediting agencies in the United States and the provincial entities in Canada concerned with the quality of Canadian graduate education.

Comprehensive accrediting reviews, at least every ten years, examine a school’s educational and institutional effectiveness in light of both the standards and the institutional mission. Based on institutional self-evaluations, accreditation committees’ visits to the schools, and subsequent reports, the Commission accredits institutions and approves the degree programs they offer. Scores of volunteers from among the member schools serve on accreditation committees each academic year.
The Commission on Accrediting maintains the definitive database on graduate theological education in North America. Data provided by the member schools each fall are used to provide a number of resources for use by member schools, the general public, prospective students, media representatives, and researchers in theological education. Members find these resources useful for institutional planning, policy development, and evaluation:

> The **Annual Data Tables** are a collection of fifty charts and graphs detailing institutional characteristics, enrollment, faculty composition and compensation, finances, and development.

> The **Fact Book on Theological Education** presents an analytical summary of the Annual Data Tables.

> The **Institutional Peer Profile Report** (IPPR) is a tailored report comparing a school’s data on enrollment, faculty, and finances with the median or average data of its peers.

> The **Strategic Information Report** (SIR), developed by ATS and the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, offers a variety of strategic indicators to help schools assess their overall financial strength and most recent financial performance and to provide analytic resources for strategic planning.

ATS member schools also may elect to participate in two programs that provide student information and organizational evaluation services:

> The **Profiles of Ministry** (PoM) program helps students assess their personal and professional gifts for ministry.

> The **Entering Student Questionnaire** (ESQ), **Graduating Student Questionnaire** (GSQ), and **Alumni/alae Questionnaire** (AQ) help schools understand their students’ characteristics, as well as the students’ assessment of the education they received and their work and experience after leaving seminary.

Additional resources share the work of the Association with its membership and others:

> The **Bulletin**, the formal record of the Association’s work

> **Colloquy**, a semiannual magazine

> **Theological Education**, a semiannual journal

> The website, [www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu)
In a given year, as many as 900 theological administrators and faculty participate in programs sponsored by the Association.

In addition to being a community of accountability through accreditation, ATS is also a learning community. Through its comprehensive program of leadership education, the Association has fostered the development of several administrator groups that plan, implement, and evaluate programs of peer education for their distinctive communities of practice.

Presidents in their first three years in office gather annually to discuss theological school leadership with other new presidents and with experienced theological school leaders. Whether they come to the office from the church, from the academy, or from theological education, they gain understanding of the theological school—its complexities and challenges, its aims and purposes.

ATS also sponsors a week-long presidential leadership event that annually affords more concentrated time to address the president’s role in institutional planning, advancement, evaluation, finance, and championing the institutional mission.

In addition to the programs for presidents, ATS also supports peer education for four other administrative positions that generally constitute the president’s cabinet: the academic dean, development officer, financial officer, and student personnel officer. Professional groups have formed around these positions, and they gather annually for skill building, networking, sharing best practices, and mutual support. As communities of practice, they share a common vocation in support of graduate theological education.
ATS encourages the development of faculty in several venues. An annual seminar for faculty who are new to theological education introduces them to the goals and purposes of a theological school and the common vocation of a theological faculty in support of the school’s mission. Occasional special-focus programs for faculty address issues of concern across the schools; recent programs have focused on curricular revision and the role of the faculty in theological school governance.

For more than forty years, the Association has supported the scholarly work of faculty. Currently, this effort is implemented through two regranting programs that advance research in the theological disciplines and nurture the development of scholars.

> Initiated in 1993, the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology program has become the premiere fellowship program in theology in North America. Supporting scholarship of the highest caliber, the program has developed a cadre of scholars and scholarly publication in service to the church, the academy, and the general public.

> The Lilly Theological Research Grants program offers three types of grants for research and scholarship, with an emphasis on encouraging the work of younger faculty and their development as scholars.
In its routine biennial planning cycle, the ATS Board of Directors identifies issues of interest or concern to the schools, seeks funding to address them programmatically, and invites schools into extended conversations in the area of Association work called “issues and initiatives.” Recent projects in this area have focused on the relationship of theological schools to the churches, technology and educational practices, and assessing student learning. Projects on the horizon include institutional viability and financially stressed schools, and Christian ministry in an increasingly religiously plural context.
The Association and the ATS Commission on Accrediting are separate corporations whose work and mission are intricately interwoven. Schools must be members of ATS before they can be accredited by the ATS Commission on Accrediting. Each corporation has its own board, elected by the member schools and made up of representatives of the schools and public members who bring expertise in areas such as finance, law, higher education, or the church. Schools pay membership dues based on their general and educational expenditures. The dues are divided between the two organizations, the Commission receiving 75 percent of the dues and the Association, 25 percent. The work of the Commission on Accrediting is funded entirely by membership dues and accrediting fees. The Association receives 8 percent of its budget from member dues, and the remaining portion of its budget is derived from foundation grants, fees received from ATS programs and services, and revenues from the ATS program support fund.

In addition to its members, ATS grants affiliate status to organizations with a substantial interest in theological education in the Christian or Jewish faiths but not involved in educational programs leading to a degree, as well as to institutions of higher education offering graduate theological degrees related to communities of faith other than the Christian or Jewish faiths.
The Association is grateful for the generous support of a number of private foundations whose philanthropy values theological education and its central purposes. Among these supportive foundations in recent years are Lilly Endowment, The Henry Luce Foundation, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the McCune Foundation.