

# An Overview of The Association of Theological Schools for University and College Presidents

## What is The Association of Theological Schools (ATS)?

- ATS is comprised of **two entities** that share **one mission**—To promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.
  - ♦ The **Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools**, through its Board of Commissioners, oversees the work of accrediting of the schools that make up its membership.
  - ♦ **The Association of Theological Schools**, through its Board of Directors, is responsible for leadership education, issues and initiatives in theological education, communications and data, and research.
- ATS has a **diverse membership** of Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish institutions that offer graduate theological education in the United States and Canada.
  - ♦ The membership of nearly 265 accredited and almost two dozen associate member schools, scattered across North America, is often described as a “big tent” or “long pew” that welcomes a broad range of Christian and Jewish ecclesial families and theological commitments. Schools vary dramatically in structure, setting, enrollment, and budget size.
  - ♦ 43% of ATS schools are embedded (vs. freestanding) and include **divinity schools, schools of theology, departments of theology, and seminaries**.
- ATS holds **four core values**:
  - ♦ **Diversity** in expressions of faith that are represented by member schools and seeks to respect the varying understandings of theology, polity, religious leadership, and social commitments.
  - ♦ **Quality and Improvement** in the practice of ministry and educational practices. Quality is always linked to improvement; even schools that have achieved a high degree of quality can improve.
  - ♦ **Collegiality** as schools learn together and cooperate in common tasks. Regardless of difference in theological perspective, organizational complexity, or institutional size, ATS schools can learn from one another, cooperate on common tasks, and hold themselves accountable to common practices and quality.
  - ♦ **Leadership** that is essential for schools to attain their missions. ATS is committed to developing the skills and capacities of administrators, faculties, and boards of member schools.
- ATS holds recognition with the US Department of Education (**USDE**) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (**CHEA**).

## What are the benefits of ATS membership?

- ATS accreditation serves as the gold standard in theological education and demonstrates **credibility** to a school's publics through peer review.
- The Commission on Accrediting is one of 37 recognized accrediting agencies of the US Department of Education, enabling schools to access **federal Title IV monies**.
- Member schools **hold one another accountable** to quality assurance and improvement.
- Schools have **access to data** (financial, enrollment, employment) specific to themselves and to research on theological education more broadly.
- ATS opens doors to **connection and a community of conversation**, to interdenominational and interfaith contacts, chaplaincy programs, and granting agencies (such as the Lilly Foundation Inc.).
- Each \$1 paid in membership dues to the ATS leverages on average more than \$10 of **resources and services** that provide education, networking, and research for schools and their personnel.

## What should a president know about accreditation for a theological school?

- The Commission on Accrediting Standards of Accreditation are **principle-based** and focus on **educational quality, accreditation clarity, and contextualized flexibility**.
  - ♦ The **Standards of Accreditation** address: (1) mission and integrity, (2) planning and evaluation, (3) student learning and formation, (4) master's degree programs, (5) doctoral degree programs, (6) library and information services, (7) student services, (8) faculty, (9) governance and administration, and (10) institutional resources.
  - ♦ The **Standards recognize and respect member schools' unique missions, histories, constituencies, and theological commitments**, while upholding common understandings and aspirations that draw us together as a community amid our diversity.
- The Commission on Accrediting **Policies and Procedures** address: (I) membership criteria, (II-III) achieving and maintaining accreditation, (IV) substantive changes (e.g., changes in legal status, degrees, locations), and (V-VII) Board composition, decisions, and communications.

## How are theological schools like (and not like) other academic units?

- Theological schools are **professional schools** (in this way, more like a law, medical, or business school than a department of religion or sociology).
- Theological schools give attention to the **intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational** dimensions of student learning and formation and bring expertise in leading conversations about **purpose, meaning, vocation, and ethics**.
- Theological schools speak the language of **the church and the academy**. Service requirements for theological faculty typically include **service both to the institution and to the church/denomination/congregation** in addition to teaching and scholarship.
- **Standards of scholarship** are rigorous but distinctive.
- Theological school advisory groups (whether advisory committees, fiduciary boards, or other bodies) play an important role in engaging constituents and shaping mission.
- For centuries, theologically educated leaders have provided valuable leadership to **congregations, denominations, agencies, and the world** more broadly.
- Graduates who engage theological education seek to serve in venues that **rarely draw substantial compensation**.

## What characterizes productive relationships between embedded theological schools and their host institutions?

- A **mutual understanding and appreciation** of purpose between the embedded school and the host institution including a clear sense of the value each brings to the relationship.
- **Structures and services** from the host institution that support and empower the embedded school (e.g., registrar, advancement, grant writing, finance, institutional research) while acknowledging its distinctness.
- A continually reinforced spirit of **partnership and active dialogue** rooted in trust and steady communication among faculty, students, and administrators.

## How can presidents support theological schools and their leaders?

- Encourage understanding of *both* the **distinctive character** of the theological school's mission *and* the **compatibility of that mission** with the mission of the larger institution.
- Learn about the **communities of faith and other publics** the theological school serves, including why donors give to theological institutions.
- Explore the **programmatically accrediting responsibilities** of the theological school.
- Define clear **reporting and accountability structures** and check in annually about the adequacy of support services used and/or needed by theological schools.
- **Foster connections and understanding** between the university/college board and the board structure of the theological school.
- **Encourage leaders of theological schools to engage with the larger institution**, to learn and to share insight with academic and administrative peers.
- **Support campus wide conversations** about spirituality, religion, and theology and the connection of these topics to other fields of study.
- Incorporate the work of the theological school entity in overall institutional **strategic planning**.
- Review the **Standards of Accreditation**, particularly those related to Mission and Integrity (1), Planning and Evaluation (2), Governance and Administration (9), and Institutional Resources (10).

## Where can I learn more?

- **Policies and Procedures** (<https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/policies-and-procedures.pdf>)
- **Standards of Accreditation** (<https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation.pdf>)
- **A listing of member schools** with current enrollment data, names of school leaders, and the Commission staff member who serves each school. (<https://www.ats.edu/Find-a-School>)
- **The Accrediting Liaison Officer (ALO) Hub** site describes the role and responsibilities of the ALO, provides a primer on ATS and the Board of Commissioners (BOC), introduces the documents that guide the relationship between schools and the BOC, and instructs the ALO about accrediting activities. (<https://atscoa.instructure.com/courses/438>)
- **Engage ATS** is an online community designed for ATS members to engage one another in important discussions, to promote peer learnings, and to build shared resources to enhance their work in supporting graduate theological education. (<https://engage.ats.edu/home>).
- Contact the Commission staff member who serves your school!