

Board of Commissioners

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

*A consolidation of all chapters
of the Self-Study Handbook*

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SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER ONE

*An Introduction to Accreditation
by the Commission on Accrediting*



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

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Introduction

Accreditation is a primary means of quality assurance in North American higher education and a significant resource for quality improvement. This chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* introduces the accreditation of theological schools by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools (“Commission”) through brief descriptions of the meaning, purposes, characteristics, and benefits of Commission accreditation. While each of these descriptions merits further elaboration, their combination provides an appropriate introduction.

Accreditation is a practice that originated with institutions of higher education in North America. Historically, accreditation has been a voluntary activity in which institutions agree on standards of educational quality and then hold themselves mutually accountable to those standards. To do this, schools form accrediting associations and, in addition to the standards, adopt procedures by which the accrediting standards are administered. Each school is evaluated according to the standards in a three-part process: (1) the school evaluates itself by conducting a self-study; (2) a committee of peers from other accredited institutions visits the school to evaluate the institution and, on the basis of its findings, prepares a narrative report with recommendations to the accrediting decision-making body; and (3) the accrediting body considers reports from the various accreditation committees and, in the context of the formally adopted standards, makes decisions about the accredited status of the schools. Accreditation, at its most basic level, is the practice of engaging these activities as a means by which autonomous institutions hold themselves accountable to mutual understandings of educational and institutional quality.

The Meaning of Commission Accreditation

The meaning of accreditation, while it has varied over time, has always been associated with judgments about quality. Accreditation is granted by agencies, like the Commission, that are entirely nongovernmental and do not have the authority to confer any legal status on schools. Theological schools in the United States and Canada derive legal authority by state or provincial action to conduct their corporate business, deliver educational programs, and grant degrees. Such governmental actions, however, do not provide any judgment about the overall quality of an institution. The assessment of institutional and educational quality has been the work of agencies like the Commission on Accrediting, and the most technical meaning of “accredited” is that an accrediting agency has evaluated a school and determined that it functions according to the standards of quality adopted by the agency.

As accrediting standards have evolved, the meaning of “accredited” has changed. In North America, the underlying meaning of

accreditation has taken three forms since the predecessor organizations of the Commission on Accrediting began accrediting theological schools in the 1930s. Each of these forms has introduced new expectations while maintaining previous ones.

In its first Standards of Accreditation, the Commission on Accrediting, along with most other North American higher education accrediting agencies before World War II, evaluated schools in terms of their resources. Accredited Member status indicated that a school had adequate library resources, facilities, and faculties appropriate in skill and education for graduate, professional theological education.

A second movement, one that emerged in the second half of the century, reflected the increasing diversity of higher education institutions, including theological schools. Until the 1960s, most theological schools had a similar purpose: offering the Bachelor of Divinity degree for persons (almost exclusively men) preparing for ordination in Protestant denominations in the United States and Canada. By the 1970s, however, the purposes of ATS schools began to change as Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant schools sought accreditation, as degree programs multiplied, and as student bodies became more diverse. The result was that ATS accreditation added a new question to its historical one about resources: Are the resources appropriate to the educational programs and goals of the institution? To be accredited, during this second movement in ATS accreditation, meant that a theological school was judged to have resources appropriate to graduate theological education *and* that its resources were appropriate for its educational programs and purposes.

Accreditation is now in a third historical moment. In addition to the evaluation of resources and assessment in terms of educational programs and goals, accrediting evaluation asks about the way in which and the extent to which the educational goals and purposes have been attained. The current Commission Standards of Accreditation, like the standards of other higher education accrediting bodies, emphasize the importance of institutional and educational effectiveness and require schools to be able to demonstrate how they are accomplishing the goals that the school establishes for its educational programs. To be accredited, according to current Commission Standards, means that a theological school has resources appropriate to graduate theological education in general, that its resources are appropriate to the school's

particular mission and educational programs, *and* that it is able to demonstrate the extent to which its educational and institutional goals are being achieved.

Accreditation by the ATS Commission on Accrediting, during each of these historical moments, has been based on Standards adopted by the community of theological schools, thus reflecting a social construction of quality in graduate, professional theological education. The perception of quality contained in the current Standards of Accreditation was constructed by a collaborative process, across a wide range of schools that relate to a broad range of religious communities, at a particular historical moment. It is a perception of quality that is faithful to the theological character of theological schools, congruent with preceding understandings of quality among the member schools, appropriate to the broader context of higher education, and sensitive to the educational needs of religious communities in North America.

The Purposes of Commission Accreditation

Accreditation has generally served two purposes in twentieth-century higher education. The first is to ensure that institutions of higher education function according to *standards of institutional and educational quality*. Whatever the definition of quality contained in accrediting standards, the processes of accreditation have sought to ensure that, at the very least, some acceptable level of these standards of quality is present in an accredited institution. During the twentieth century, the understanding of “acceptable level” continued to escalate so that accrediting standards were more rigorous and sophisticated at the end of the century than they were earlier in the century. The second purpose of accreditation is the *improvement* of institutions and their educational programs. Institutions that have clearly met basic standards of quality should improve, both institutionally and educationally, and accreditation is a process that encourages that improvement. Accreditation has other purposes, but these two are the most common and central to the Commission’s approach to accreditation.

The Commission seeks to accomplish these general purposes of accreditation for a particular group of institutions: theological schools in the United States and Canada that are within the Christian or Jewish traditions and conduct postbaccalaureate degree programs of education for religious leadership and scholarship in the theological

disciplines. Theological education takes many forms in North America—from efforts in congregations for lay persons, in urban training centers and institutes that educate religious leaders who do not have baccalaureate degrees, in baccalaureate degree granting institutions, and in the graduate professional institutes that are accredited member schools of the Commission on Accrediting. These are all viable forms of theological education needed by congregational and other religious communities. The purpose of Commission accreditation, however, is to make judgments about one segment of theological education comprising postbaccalaureate, degree-granting, educational institutions located in Canada or the United States.

The Components of Commission Accreditation

The activities of accreditation have a variety of characteristics, including agreed-upon standards and procedures, the process of institutional self-evaluation, the process of peer review, and the work of the Board of Commissioners (“Board”).

Standards and Procedures

Commission accreditation is based on Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”) and *Policies and Procedures* (“Procedures”) that have been adopted by the Commission’s membership. The Standards and Procedures are published online and in print in the *Bulletin*.

The Commission Standards consist of two major parts. The first part includes Standards related to institutional and educational resources and processes, and includes sections on purpose, planning, evaluation, integrity, theological curriculum, library resources, faculty, students, governance, finance, and distance education. The second part has a general standard about educational programs that identifies general educational qualities for graduate theological degrees that transcend particular degree program expectations. It then sets forth specific Standards for each type of degree program offered by accredited schools that define an agreed-upon understanding of their purpose, content, location, duration, resources, and admission requirements.

Both the institutional and the educational Standards identify minimum expectations of accredited schools and directions about institutional improvement. The Commission Standards of Accreditation have a normative function in theological education in that they embody a

definition of quality that has been established by the broader community of theological schools. While the standards provide room for more than one perception of quality, they constitute a normative reference for an accredited institution's self-evaluation, the evaluation work of peer review committees, and the decisions of the Board. The procedures of the Commission constitute the agreed-upon processes and conventions by which schools, evaluation committees, and the Board conduct their respective work in the accreditation process.

Through its Board of Commissioners, the Commission *accredits* an institution on the basis of the standards as a whole and *approves* each of the degree programs the institution offers on the basis of the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards*. The *Self-Study Handbook* provides guidance about the use and interpretation of the Commission standards in Chapter Five, "Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation."

Institutional Self-Evaluation

During the past 50 years, accreditation procedures, including the Commission's, have increasingly emphasized the importance of institutional self-evaluation as an important element in accreditation. Through a process of self-study, an institution engages in a sustained and serious evaluation of itself in the context of standards adopted by the wider community of theological schools. A good self-study evaluates the school's strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness in light of the Commission standards and the institution's purpose and goals. Institutions should use the self-study process to identify how the school is implementing the expectations of the standards, to identify how the school can improve, and to contribute to institutional planning. The self-study report should be fair, candid, and thoughtfully informative for the school and the peer review committee. The *Handbook* provides comprehensive guidance about the self-study process in Chapter Two, "Guidelines for Conducting an Institutional Self-Study."

Peer Review

Accreditation evaluation involves a process of peer review. Individuals are chosen to evaluate an institution because of their general competence in theological education and specific areas of expertise—academics, finances, administration, library, student services, etc. They have

been trained in the interpretation and application of the standards as well as procedures for their work as accreditation evaluation committee members. They function, however, as peer evaluators who contribute their time and expertise to the school being evaluated on behalf of Commission. Their task is to review the school's own self-study and evaluate the institution and its educational programs in the context of the Commission accrediting standards, prepare a report and recommendations to be considered by the Board, and serve the school by helping it identify its strengths and weaknesses. Accreditation evaluation is a sensitive and serious endeavor, and responsible peer review is central to the process. Commission peer review seeks to provide an objective, knowledgeable evaluation of a school in the context of a shared commitment to quality in theological education across many schools.

As part of a peer evaluation process, members of Commission accreditation committees serve without remuneration, and accredited institutions are expected to make it possible for their faculty and administrators to serve on evaluation committees when requested. Chapter Four of this *Handbook* provides extensive counsel for persons serving on Commission accreditation evaluation committees, "Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees." Chapter Three of the *Handbook*, "Guidelines for Institutions Receiving Commission Accreditation Evaluation Committees," provides guidelines for institutional preparation and hosting of accreditation evaluation committees.

Board of Commissioners

The Board is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the Commission's list of accredited schools and implementing the accrediting standards fairly across the accredited members of the Commission. In making its decisions, the Board relies on the reports of the committees that have visited schools, is bound by the procedures adopted by the Commission, and interprets and implements the Commission Standards of Accreditation. The Board consists of 16 to 20 members (80 percent from accredited institutions and 20 percent public members or ministry practitioners—persons unrelated to Commission schools as employees, students, or board members) who are elected by the members of the Commission. The Commission Bylaws give full power to the Board to make all accreditation decisions, subject only to

the formally adopted process of appeals. No other entity in ATS or the Commission has influence on the decisions made by the Board.

The Commission contracts with the Association for senior and support personnel to work on its behalf. Staff provide consultation to the schools about accrediting issues, conduct workshops and Board-mandated staff visits to schools, maintain the accreditation visit schedule, appoint evaluation committee members, provide on-site support to committees during evaluation visits, prepare the agenda for the Board meetings, maintain its records, and in other appropriate ways support the work of the Board.

The Benefits of Commission Accreditation

Because the purposes of Commission accreditation are to ensure standards of quality and to facilitate the improvement of theological schools, the benefits of accreditation accrue from the attainment of these purposes. These benefits, however, are experienced in different ways—by the institutions, their internal constituencies, and their external constituencies.

Institutions

The primary benefit to institutions is accreditation's impetus toward improvement. Improvement may be prompted as a consequence of schools' efforts to meet Commission General Institutional and Educational and Degree Program Standards, by the assessment of external peer reviewers, or by the judgment about institutional strengths and areas of needed growth reflected in Board decisions. Many schools, for example, complete their self-study and perceive that the process itself resulted in significant improvement for the school, quite apart from the evaluation committee's findings or the Board's actions. Other schools have noted that committee evaluations or Board actions have provided an impetus for institutional improvement by helping the school focus on and give priority to issues of concern or by providing an external requirement to address areas the school knew it needed to address but that internal conditions had kept it from doing.

Institutions also benefit from their accreditation when other agencies or institutions make judgments about a school on the basis of its accredited status. For example, because the US Department

of Education recognizes the Commission on Accrediting of ATS, Commission accreditation fulfills one of the Department's requirements for institutional eligibility for student participation in federally guaranteed student loan programs. In Canada, some provincial entities have used Commission accreditation as a factor in decisions about the acceptability of degrees individuals have earned from theological institutions in other provinces. Accreditation thus provides an external assessment of the quality of the school and its educational programs, which other institutions and agencies then accept.

Internal Constituencies: Students, Faculty, and Administration

Students benefit from their school's accreditation. Work completed at accredited schools is more easily transferred to other institutions—although acceptance of transfer credit is always the decision of individual institutions. A degree from a Commission-accredited theological school is recommended or required for ordination in many denominations, recognition by certain professional associations, and employment in some contexts. Accreditation makes possible forms of public recognition of the academic work students have completed. Students also benefit by Commission standards that require institutions to administer student financial support in appropriate ways, to provide appropriate services to students, and to adopt and follow patterns of procedural fairness in decisions about students. Finally, students benefit from an accreditation process that ensures the academic and professional integrity of the degrees they earn. While this may mean more or harder work to earn the degree, it ensures students that their work exposes them to the disciplines and practices recognized as important for theological study.

Faculty do much of the work accreditation requires of institutions, especially the self-study, but they, too, receive benefits. The Commission standards support the central role of faculty in theological education, articulate the freedom of inquiry necessary for good scholarship, and provide guidance for many of the educational and professional roles faculty assume. As the standards provide an impetus for institutional improvement, theological schools become better places to teach, learn, and conduct research.

Accreditation also serves administrators, particularly as it provides guidance to a wide range of institutional functions, supports appropriate and fair patterns of governance, and offers an external pattern of review that can help a school understand what it does well and where it needs to improve.

External Constituencies: Denominations, Financial Supporters, and the Public

Accreditation benefits the denominations and other constituencies that support theological schools. It provides an external review of institutions that, in turn, can help supporting constituencies determine how others judge the quality of “their” school. It also provides a normative standard for degrees across theological schools. A denomination or congregation, for example, can assume that an MDiv earned from any Commission-accredited school reflects common expectations of educational achievement and curricular exposure to the disciplines of theological and ministerial studies. Still another benefit to external constituencies is the exposure accreditation provides to agreed-upon patterns of good practice. Most Commission standards have developed over time as schools have struggled with difficulties, observed their successes, and learned from their mistakes. Commission standards thus reflect a kind of accrued wisdom about both resources and institutional practices that are necessary for good theological education.

Financial supporters of Commission schools can benefit from accreditation in a way similar to their benefit from financial auditing. The function of accreditation, while it is not an audit, provides an external, independent judgment about the strengths and weaknesses of an institution and encourages wise use of its resources and careful attention to its mission. These forms of accountability ensure financial supporters that the institution is engaged in appropriate educational efforts and that those efforts conform to normative expectations of quality. Accreditation also benefits a wider public, which is often uninformed about theological schools. It provides assurance that the schools in their communities are responsible citizens in the higher education community.

Because accreditation seeks to benefit institutions as well as both their internal and external constituencies, it cannot serve as the special

advocate on behalf of any one of these beneficiaries. The primary focus of accreditation is on a common good; theological schools exist for the sake of religious communities and the society as a whole.

The Broader Accrediting Community in Higher Education

The Commission is one of many agencies involved in the accreditation of higher education.

Some of these accreditors, like the Commission, accredit entire institutions. In the United States, the dominant institutional accrediting bodies are the six regional associations, each accrediting a wide range of postsecondary degree-granting institutions in its geographic area. Virtually every college, university, and community college, as well as a broad range of special-purpose institutions, is accredited by the regional association in whose geographic boundaries the institution is located. The majority of Commission-accredited schools in the United States are also accredited by a regional accrediting body.

Other accreditors accredit professional or programmatic areas of study undertaken in larger institutions. Social work, medicine, law, teacher education, allied health, counseling, and many other areas of study in preparation for professional practice have their own specialized accrediting bodies. When the Commission accredits a university-related divinity school or a college-related seminary, it functions as a professional accreditor for the theological school.

Accreditation evaluation visits on occasion may include *joint visits* (one committee jointly representing two accrediting agencies throughout the entire visit, with separate reports issued subsequently); *coordinated visits* (two committees representing two accrediting agencies that coordinate some interviews during the visit); or *concurrent visits* (two committees representing two accrediting agencies whose visits occur at the same time, but do not work together in any fashion). Due to requirements of the US Department of Education, very few visits are now conducted as either joint or coordinated visits. Schools should consult with their ATS Commission staff liaison at least a year before the visit to see if either type of visit is permitted. Concurrent visits, on the other hand, are the sole discretion of the school, unless the school wishes to write a combined self-study report that is not organized according to Commission standards, in which case the school must first receive permission from its ATS Commission staff liaison.

If a school is granted permission from ATS Commission staff to write a combined self-study report (for any of these types of visits), that report must include a chart or table indicating on what exact pages each Commission standard is addressed. Accreditation that is not recognized by either the US Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is not regulated. Because accrediting bodies are founded by the schools they accredit, a few schools could form an accrediting association, with standards that do not address quality, and claim an “accredited” status. In reality, this has happened infrequently in theological education, but it has happened. There are quality controls for accrediting agencies, which are obtained in three ways. The first is the responsibility of the schools to adopt standards that are fair and rigorous—to hold themselves accountable to a high standard of quality. The second is for the accrediting agency to seek the recognition of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. This Washington-based, nongovernmental agency recognizes accrediting agencies that demonstrate that their accreditation supports quality in higher education, contributes to improvement in higher education, provides public information and quality assurance about higher education, and functions with skill and integrity as an accreditation agency. CHEA recognition is limited to agencies that accredit degree-granting higher education institutions or programs within such institutions. The third quality control is recognition by the US Secretary of Education. The Department of Education reviews agencies by a variety of criteria to determine whether the accreditation provided by an accrediting body is sufficiently rigorous and appropriate to warrant the Department of Education to certify an institution eligible for its students to receive guaranteed federal loans. This certification can be extended to institutions in the United States or Canada, if they desire to participate in these federal programs for US citizens. In the case of recognition by the US Department of Education, accrediting agencies are regulated, and some standards and procedures of the Commission on Accrediting have been adopted to meet US federal regulations.

The Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools is recognized by both the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the US Secretary of Education.

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK
CHAPTER TWO

*Guidelines for Conducting
an Institutional Self-Study*



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

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Introduction

A self-study is the primary activity by which an institution prepares for a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. It is a process by which an institution comprehensively reviews itself through the normative perspective of the Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”). The primary activities of this review are evaluation and assessment. The study results in a report that should serve the institution, the accreditation evaluation committee, and the Board of Commissioners (“Board”). This chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* provides guidance to schools undertaking a self-study in terms of (1) the overall purposes of the self-study, (2) the primary work of the self-study, (3) recommended procedures for conducting a self-study, and (4) expectations of the Board of Commissioners regarding the final self-study report.

Purpose of the Self-Study

An institutional self-study should serve many purposes. Generally, each school’s planning should include these three purposes of self-study: institutional evaluation, institutional planning, and preparation for external review.

Institutional Evaluation

The self-study process provides both the occasion and the perspective to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of a school, that is, its educational programs and institutional activities. Evaluation is described as a fourfold process in the Standards. Because evaluation is a central feature of the Standards and the self-study process, it is described briefly in this chapter and at length in Chapter Five of the *Handbook*, “Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation.” Good evaluation involves analyzing information so that value judgments can be made about the merit, integrity, or appropriateness of particular educational or institutional activities. The self-study is a process by which the various constituencies of a school can evaluate its efforts to enhance its practices and programs.

Institutional Planning

Planning is a process by which institutions review and undertake to improve their lives. It involves making decisions about what new activities should be undertaken, what activities should be abandoned in order to apply scarce resources to other activities, what must be accomplished in the near future, and what should be deferred to a later time. Good planning can ensure fairness and equity in the

application of resources across the range of agreed-upon activities, and it can direct sustainable patterns of improvement. Because the self-study process requires a comprehensive evaluation, it provides the occasion for the institution to review and revise its strategic plans.

Evaluation and planning, of course, are activities that good institutions pursue on an ongoing basis. The self-study does not introduce these activities once every 10 years, but it brings both into a particular focus. A good self-study report describes the results of the institution's self-evaluation and the implementation of decisions based on that evaluation through a comprehensive institutional and educational plan. Self-studies that accomplish these purposes require thoughtful and broad-based work, and they serve the institution very well—regardless of the findings of an evaluation committee.

Preparation for External Review

Although the process of self-study serves several internal purposes, the self-study report itself also addresses an external audience. Because the report is the primary means by which the institution presents itself for external review, the final report should give the accreditation evaluation committee a good description of the ways in which the school first gathers and organizes appropriate information, then goes about its evaluation based on that information, and finally uses the findings of its evaluative efforts in institutional planning and educational programming.

The external review requires that the self-study report be analytical and evaluative, not just descriptive. While some description is necessary for informed external review, a self-study report that only describes an institution and its programs according to the Standards is incomplete. The report should demonstrate that the school engages in an ongoing process of self-study that reflects the extensive cycle of evaluative activities that constitute, in part, the basis for granting accredited status (i.e., evaluation, planning, etc.). Institutions can be assured that thoughtful, analytical, evaluative information will be treated respectfully and confidentially and that good, self-critical, evaluative, analytical work becomes, in the end, the school's best case that it should be accredited.

Because the external committee is required to prepare its report on the basis of the Standards, the self-study process and report should

demonstrate specifically how the institution meets the Standards. If a school discovers that it does not implement a Standard appropriately, then the self-study process should provide recommendations for changes necessary to implement the Standard in the school's institutional or educational activities.

The Primary Task of Institutional Self-Study: Evaluation

While higher education accreditation has always involved evaluation of institutions, its most recent emphasis, reflected in the Standards, refocuses accreditation on the schools' own practices of evaluating their institutional and educational effectiveness. As a result, evaluation should have a central place in both the self-study process and the report. Evaluation is described in the *General Institutional Standards* in the following terms:

. . . Evaluation is a process that includes (1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance; (2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals; (3) the assessment of the performance of the program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on this assessment. . . . (Standard 1, section 1.2.2).

This description of the evaluation process also provides a model for understanding how a self-study should be conducted.

The self-study is an appropriate time to review the institution's **goals** in areas addressed by the Standards. This review involves two evaluative tasks. The first asks a normative question: *Are these goals appropriate for an accredited school to have for its various areas of work, in terms of the agreed-upon commitments of the community of theological schools expressed by the Standards?* This first question is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Schools must also evaluate their goals in light of particular institutional issues. Thus, the second task is to ask a contextual question: *Are these goals the right ones for this institution, at this particular point in its history, in the context of the issues confronting the particular religious communities it serves, and in light of the institution's broader mission and purpose?* In many schools, substantive discussions should occur in self-study subcommittees about the value of present goals and the need for revised ones.

Once goals are properly established, the institution needs to identify the kind of **information** it will need in order to assess the attainment of those goals. Institutions that are functioning according to the Standards will have systems of information-gathering in place and, in the context of the self-study, should review comprehensively the information that has been collected. This review will involve questions like: (1) *Is the right kind of information being collected?* (2) *Is the information collected in usable forms?* and (3) *Does the school use the information effectively in the evaluation process?* For schools that have not developed an overall process of information-gathering, the self-study will focus on different questions: (1) *What kinds of information should be collected?* and (2) *What institutional systems will be necessary for collecting this information?* Because these schools need to make evaluative judgments about their efforts, even if they have not developed a comprehensive system of information-gathering, they will need to begin the work of the self-study by auditing all information that is available to determine what available data will inform the evaluative focus of the self-study and what will need to be gathered.

Assessment is the task of analyzing and interpreting the information that has been collected. It involves the question: *To what extent, and in what ways, have the goals been attained?* Information alone, no matter how rich or sophisticated, cannot answer this question. The important goals in theological education are complex and require judgment and reflection based on reasonable patterns of information. Using the available information, self-study subcommittees should assess the quality of an area of concern by reflecting on the ways in which, and the extent to which, the institution is achieving its goals.

The final phase of the evaluation process involves **making decisions** about the goals and the activities that have been devised to achieve the goals. Interpretation in the assessment phase may lead to the conclusion that a goal was attained, but that, in the final analysis, it was not or is no longer a worthy goal. In this case, attention turns to the ways in which the goal should be altered or abandoned in favor of a more appropriate one. Assessment may lead to the conclusion that a central and important goal has not been attained, and attention then turns to the ways in which the activities designed to achieve the goal should be revised. The assessment phase may also lead to the conclusion that the goal and the activities are appropriate, but the kind of

information that has been collected does not serve the assessment process well or sufficiently. In this case, attention turns to the development of more appropriate or comprehensive methods of gathering information. In the context of the self-study, these deliberations typically lead to proposals for goals, program development, or information gathering that become recommendations in the self-study.

The description of evaluation in the Standards was not written merely as a direction for conducting the self-study but is meant to guide institutional behavior more broadly. Self-study, however, is a particular activity of accredited schools that is, fundamentally, an evaluative activity, and this definition of the evaluation process is instructive. The work of the self-study involves more than evaluation, but evaluation is central. The Board of Commissioners requires accreditation evaluation committees to evaluate the self-study. While accreditation is not based on the quality of self-studies, a school's inability to conduct an evaluative self-study may be evidence of a more pervasive inability to function according to the expectations of the Standards.

Conducting the Self-Study

Good self-studies reflect appropriate decisions by institutions regarding the conduct of the study. Conducting a self-study involves the development of an organizational structure for the study, including the identification of working groups and key roles to be filled by individuals, the establishment of a timetable, and the development of an approval process for the final self-study report.

Organizational Structure for the Self-Study

No one design is the "correct" one for this task; any organization of the process that accomplishes the work effectively and enables the institution to achieve the purposes of the self-study described above is appropriate and acceptable. However structured, though, the study should evaluate the institution and its programs in terms of each of the institutional, general educational, and relevant Degree Program Standards. If an institution receives permission from Commission staff to host a joint, coordinated, or concurrent visit, including permission to write a combined self-study report, that report must contain a chart or table showing on what exact pages in the combined report each Commission Standard is addressed.

The work is done, almost always, by a steering committee and several subcommittees. Along with these groups, two individuals are crucial to the success of the study: the director of the self-study, who typically chairs the steering committee, and the editor of the self-study report.

The **steering committee** guides the self-study by supervising the process and the development of a coherent report. The committee should be representative of all or most of the constituencies that compose the school: students, faculty, administration, staff, and, when available, alumni/ae and trustees. Responsibilities of the steering committee include the following:

1. Initiating the self-study by developing its design, organizing the committee structure, developing task assignments for each subcommittee, and determining the overall schedule for the study.
2. Overseeing the conduct of the study through activities such as monitoring the progress of the subcommittees and providing support for their work as appropriate, mediating questions of overlapping issues among subcommittees, and developing editorial guidelines for the drafts of subcommittee reports.
3. Developing and overseeing the stages of review, revision, and approval, including a procedure for reviewing drafts of subcommittee reports; a process whereby constituencies participating in aspects of the self-study can react to the evaluation, proposals, and recommendations generated by the self-study; and a process of ensuring institutional support for the final report, including acceptance of the report, prior to submission to the Board of Commissioners, by the governing board or its executive committee.
4. Assisting with the development of a plan for follow-up and the implementation of the self-study recommendations.

The steering committee should guide the self-study with care, ensuring that the process approaches evaluation through the perspective of the Standards (and those of a regional accrediting body if the self-study is conducted for a joint evaluation). The steering committee should also review the school's accreditation history and ensure that the self-study addresses concerns raised in the context of the previous comprehensive evaluation as well as accreditation-related issues that have emerged since that last review.

Much of the work of the self-study will be completed by **subcommittees** that have been assigned to work in specific areas. It is essential that each subcommittee understands the relationship of its work to the self-study as a whole and is informed about the overarching evaluative approach to be employed in each area of the self-study. Working from the specific charge or task assignment prepared by the steering committee, each subcommittee is responsible for evaluating those aspects of the institution related to the Standards assigned to it. It does this by reviewing the goals or purposes related to its area of study, identifying the data that can inform its evaluation, assessing the extent to which the school is accomplishing its purposes or goals with regard to the subcommittee's particular area of study, and developing recommendations regarding revised goals, revised procedures related to existing goals, or the development of more effective patterns of ongoing information gathering.

The number of subcommittees will depend both on the design of the self-study and on the size and complexity of the institution. An institution will need to decide if self-study tasks should be added to the mandates of existing institutional committees or if a special self-study committee structure should be established. Schools should determine what size the subcommittee structure should have. In some large institutions, a different subcommittee may focus on each Standard. In other institutions, the Standards may be grouped into categories for both the study process and the report. Although the Board of Commissioners does not recommend any particular patterns, the Standards lend themselves to being considered in the following ways:

For small schools, with a limited number of degree programs and a need to design the study in ways that provide the most economical use of personnel, the study could be organized with as few as three major subcommittees.

1. The Standards on Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation (1), Institutional Integrity (2), Authority and Governance (7), and Institutional Resources (8) address a broad area of institutional issues and concerns.
2. The Standards on The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research (3), Library and Information Resources (4), Faculty (5), and Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, and Placement

(6) can be grouped together so the primary activities of a theological school (teaching, learning, and research) are considered in the context of the primary participants in those activities (faculty, students, and library).

3. The Standard on educational expectations relevant to all degree programs (ES) and the individual Degree Program Standards (A–J) comprise the formal educational program of a theological school.

For larger schools, with more degree programs and a broader range of activities, the study could be designed so that work is divided among five or six subcommittees.

1. The Standards on Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation (1), Institutional Integrity (2), and Authority and Governance (7) could be assigned to one subcommittee.
2. The Standard on educational expectations relevant to all degree programs (ES) and the relevant Degree Program Standards (A–J) provide a focus on the theological school's educational programs. Depending on the range of degree programs, a school could divide this work among two or more subcommittees.
3. The Standard on Institutional Resources (8) is comprehensive and, given the pressure on finances in theological schools and the broad range of resource issues, might benefit from being the primary focus of a single subcommittee.
4. The Standards on The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research (3), Library and Information Resources (4), and Faculty (5) might provide a viable combination to focus on the overall academic life of the institution.
5. Because larger schools often have larger and more diverse student bodies, with greater student services, the Standard on Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, and Placement (6) represents a variety of concerns that could be the focus of a subcommittee.

Regardless of its assigned area, each subcommittee should focus its work using the general evaluative model described above, and more fully in Chapter Five of this *Handbook*, and understand that its work is contributing to a comprehensive evaluation of the institution.

Two roles of the self-study typically are assigned to individuals rather than committees. The **director of the self-study** provides overall leadership and coordination for the project and typically chairs the steering committee. The director should have a good sense of administrative process, a broad perspective of the institution, and the ability to facilitate a complex task. Because the director is required to ask a variety of persons to do a variety of tasks, he or she should be authorized by the institution in ways to ensure cooperation and support. The **editor of the final report** brings the various committee reports, background materials, exhibits, and appendices into a coherent and usable institutional report that should serve the needs of the school, the accreditation evaluation committee, and the Board. In some schools, the director of the self-study also serves as editor of the final report, but given the size of both tasks, many schools assign these functions to different individuals.

Scheduling the Work of the Self-Study

A minimum of one full academic year will be needed to design the self-study process, to establish the committees, to engage in the research, to reflect on the findings, and to produce a unified and comprehensive report. Most often, the entire process will occupy two academic years, although the various subcommittees will be engaged for only part of that time. A typical two-year schedule could include the following sequence of activities:

Year 1, First Term: At least two years before the visit, the ATS Commission office will invite the school to send up to two people to a self-study workshop at the ATS office in Pittsburgh. Following the workshop, the steering committee should be appointed, and during this term it should work with those who attended the self-study workshop to familiarize itself with the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, plan the organizational structure for the study, develop the subcommittee structure, write task assignments for the subcommittees, develop an overall timetable for the study, and appoint members to the subcommittees.

Year 1, Second Term: The subcommittees begin their work with the oversight of the steering committee. The goal is to have a first draft of their reports by early in the next term.

Year 2, First Term: Early this term, subcommittees submit first drafts of their reports to the steering committee. The steering committee reviews reports in the context of the study as a whole, identifies concerns, lacunae, or issues that should be addressed during the final half of the study, and advises the subcommittees as appropriate. During this term, the subcommittees complete their work and submit their final reports to the steering committee. The steering committee reviews the reports and establishes a process for review and negotiation of the subcommittee reports.

Year 2, Second Term: The steering committee solicits responses to the final subcommittee reports and begins preparation of a unified institutional evaluation and set of recommendations. The editor works on the drafts of the various institutional reports. The steering committee guides the final review and approval process.

At least 60 days before the visit, the report is completed and submitted to the ATS Commission office in anticipation of the visit of an accreditation evaluation committee in the next term. Please note that an evaluation visit for initial accreditation requires authorization from the Board of Commissioners prior to the evaluation based on a review of the self-study report, which means self-study reports for initial accreditation must be submitted by April 1 for fall visits and by December 1 for spring visits. A school should develop its schedule to fit the accreditation schedule, needs, and work patterns of the institution. The schedule should also provide adequate time to conduct the self-study satisfactorily in the context of the school's other work, which continues during the self-study.

Institutional Adoption of the Report of the Self-Study

Because the self-study involves a comprehensive evaluation of the school and its various endeavors and has recommendations that must be taken seriously by the institution in the context of its strategic planning, appropriate constituencies within the institution should have the opportunity to participate in a process of review and endorsement of the final report of the self-study. Faculty and administrators are crucial to this process, as is the governing board. The faculty and administration should be familiar with the findings and recommendations of the self-study and, to the extent possible, the recommendations should have a wide base of support. The governing board, or

its executive committee, should take formal action to receive the self-study report with the understanding that receipt or endorsement of the report reflects the board's general concurrence with its evaluation and recommendations. Subsequent to the action of the Board of Commissioners on the recommendations of the evaluation committee, the school should return to this general concurrence to review and confirm the specific recommendations in the context of the actions of the Board of Commissioners and then implement the appropriate steps in its programs and strategic plan.

The Self-Study Report

The self-study report is the written account of the study including its process, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The Board expects self-study reports to conform to some general expectations, to be organized in particular ways, and to be submitted according to the procedures of the Commission on Accrediting. Like the self-study, the final report has several purposes. It demonstrates the institution's ability to analyze its effectiveness and develop plans for its own improvement. It also provides evidence of the way in which the institution is functioning from the perspective of the Standards. Finally, it provides the basis for the work of the accreditation evaluation committee and informs the accrediting decisions made by the Board of Commissioners.

General Characteristics

The accreditation process and the multiple audiences for which the self-study report is prepared make some features of the report necessary. The report should provide sufficient **description** of the institution and the self-study process so that external readers are able to understand the school, its unique circumstances, its purpose, its commitments and constituencies, and the processes of the self-study. Reports that are only descriptive are inadequate, but reports that lack description make it difficult for external readers to prepare for the evaluation or for the Board to have a context in which to interpret the committee's report of findings and recommendations. Reports should document the **evaluation** of the school in all areas related to the Standards of Accreditation. Evaluation, as noted previously in this chapter of the *Handbook*, is central. It is the major task of the self-study and should feature prominently in the self-study report. Finally, reports

should clearly identify the **recommendations** that the institution has developed as a result of the self-study. The recommendations should inform the institution's strategic plan and reflect serious intent of the school. They should also clearly indicate how the school will meet the Standards if there are instances where the self-study evaluation concludes that the school does not sufficiently embody them.

An early 1990s study of self-studies identified some characteristics that were present in good reports and some characteristics of reports that were judged to be weak or inadequate.

Good self-study reports have several features in common. First, they have a coherent pattern of organization that clearly, but not rigidly, relates the material in the report to each Standard. When a report is being prepared for a joint Commission-regional committee, the report should cross-index material so Standards of both accrediting bodies are clearly identified and referenced. Second, good reports describe the process of the self-study so readers understand the activities of the study that resulted in the evaluation and recommendations it reports. The report should present the data that are crucial to understanding the issues in as clear and concise a manner as possible, including effective use of tables and figures. Longer or more complex summaries of data, such as financial reports, library figures, institutional statistics, results of surveys, and other studies conducted as part of the larger self-study, should be included in a supplemental section of appendices.

The report should be as comprehensive as necessary but as brief as possible. Overly lengthy reports complicate peer evaluation and sometimes indicate that the school has been unwilling or unable to identify the most critical elements of its review or the most crucial of its recommendations. The report should not reproduce at length material that is available elsewhere, especially descriptive material that may be found in the school's catalog or handbooks; these sources should be clearly referenced so that evaluation committee members can find pertinent material quickly. Throughout, the report should reflect an awareness of the accreditation process, the issues that an external evaluation committee must consider in its review of the institution, and the institutional capacity to be objective and honest in its self-evaluation.

Weak or inadequate self-study reports are often overly descriptive, not evaluative, and too lengthy. They lack a coherent organizational structure or fail to implement the organization the report professes to have. Self-study reports that fail to provide the evidence that supports the study's findings or that offer conclusions that appear not to be based on meaningful information are not helpful for evaluation committee members or the Board of Commissioners. Reports that fail to evaluate the institution thoughtfully and carefully in the context of the Standards are not useful and will be judged accordingly.

In general, the report should provide a readable and useful description of the institution, the self-study process, the evaluation of the school in terms of the Standards, and conclusions and recommendations emerging from the process. It should be constructed so that it can be understood by persons not familiar with the school and also used by groups within the school that will need to implement its recommendations. Because of the critical importance of the self-study process and report, the Board of Commissioners expects each accreditation evaluation committee to evaluate the institution's self-study report as part of the committee's report.

Structure of the Report

While institutions should present their reports in a manner suited to their studies and plans for the future use of the reports, every report must contain some common elements: (1) an introductory chapter that reviews the school's accreditation history and describes the process of the self-study, (2) a main narrative that reports the study's evaluation with reference to the Standards, and (3) a concluding chapter that presents an overall summary of the institution's self-evaluation and outlines its plans for internal follow-up on the self-study recommendations. In addition, it may be appropriate to include some reference or background information as appendices.

Introductory Chapter. This chapter should describe the background and context of the self-study. It should review the school's accreditation history and interactions with the Board since the last comprehensive evaluation. In the context of this review, it should describe institutional responses to the last accreditation committee evaluations and to actions of the Board. The introduction should give an overview of the design and process of the self-study, including the committee

structure and efforts to gain broad participation in the process, and identify any special features of the self-study that will help the reading of the report by the accreditation committee and the Board. This chapter should also summarize major changes or developments in the school since the last comprehensive evaluation and describe the organization of the report. Finally, the introduction should orient the readers to the special qualities, programs, or structures of the school. The better informed evaluation committees and the Commissioners are about the school and its unique characteristics, the better able they will be to evaluate the institution in terms of its own mission and purposes.

Main Narrative of the Report. The body of the report should include a chapter on each of the eight General Institutional Standards, a chapter that covers relevant sections of the Educational Standard, and chapters on each applicable Degree Program Standard. There is no need to discuss parts of the Educational Standard that do not apply to the school (e.g., extension education or distance education, if not offered); likewise, there is no need to discuss Degree Program Standards that the school does not offer. The various chapters of the report should be written with one unified, institutional voice with an appropriate balance between description and evaluation. The ATS website contains additional resources on writing self-study reports, including the importance of how the three parts of the Standards relate to one another.

Concluding Chapter. The final chapter or section, like the introductory one, should include certain elements, regardless of the variations an institution may choose for the main narrative. It should summarize the overall findings of the study and organize the recommendations contained in the various parts of the report into a common set with assigned priorities. In anticipation of the action of the Board of Commissioners, this chapter should clearly identify the following: (1) the strengths of the institution that should be sustained as the school grows and develops; (2) areas where efforts toward improvement should be concentrated over the next several years to strengthen the school and its educational program; and (3) areas, if any, where the study has concluded that the institution does not meet one or more of the Standards and how it has already implemented a credible plan to come into compliance with them in the near future. Finally, the

conclusion should describe how the institution plans to continue the ongoing process of evaluation, based on the model described in the Standards and reflecting the one it has used.

Appendices and Supplemental Material. Every self-study is based on more sources of information than should or could be included with the main narrative of the report. The steering committee should refer to Chapter Three of the *Self-Study Handbook* (pp. 16-18) for a list of what to include in the appendices and what supplemental material to include in the Documents Room (physical or virtual).

Submission and Distribution

The school is responsible for submitting and distributing copies of the self-study report according to policies of the Board of Commissioners, which are outlined in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics, appended to Chapter 3 of this *Handbook*.

For institutions seeking *initial accreditation*, Board policy requires the Board to evaluate the self-study prior to authorizing an initial accreditation evaluation. Two copies of the completed self-study report must be sent to the Commission office prior to the Board of Commissioners' meeting in which the report will be reviewed and a decision reached whether to authorize an initial accrediting evaluation. The due dates for submission of self-study reports prepared for an initial accreditation evaluation are April 1 for the June meeting of the Board of Commissioners and December 1 for the February meeting.

Consultation Resources

The Board of Commissioners sponsors workshops for schools engaged in self-study. Because institutional self-studies are highly individualized and should be designed to meet particular institutional needs as well as the needs of the accreditation process, ATS Commission staff are available to advise schools in self-study, including a review of an outline of the self-study and counsel regarding its format and adequacy in relation to the Standards.

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER THREE

*Guidelines for Institutions Receiving
Accreditation Evaluation Committees*

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Guidelines for Institutions Receiving Commission Accreditation Evaluation Committees

In addition to conducting the self-study and writing the report of this major effort, the school's other major task in the accreditation process involves the preparation and support necessary for the visit of an accreditation evaluation committee and attention to several details following the comprehensive evaluation. This chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* describes the activities that the school should undertake prior to, during, and following the comprehensive evaluation. It also describes Commission procedures related to accreditation evaluations. The Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics appended to this section of the *Handbook* provide more details on aspects of this section, including format and delivery of the self-study, transportation and accommodations of the evaluation committee, documents related to the self-study, and the time line of the action on the committee's recommendations by the Board of Commissioners ("Board").

Preparing for and Supporting the Work of the Accreditation Evaluation Committee

Several tasks should be completed before the comprehensive evaluation, many of them involving interactions among the school, accrediting staff, and the chair of the accreditation evaluation committee. These tasks include identification of evaluation dates, appointment of the committee, making local arrangements, preparation of a comprehensive evaluation schedule, distribution of self-study reports and related material, and preparation of additional materials to be available for the committee while on campus. In addition, the school needs to provide hospitality and support for the committee during the comprehensive evaluation.

Identification of Comprehensive Evaluation Dates

Approximately a year before the comprehensive evaluation, the accrediting staff will initiate a dialogue with the school's chief administrative officer or accreditation liaison officer about possible dates for the comprehensive evaluation. Comprehensive evaluations last from the afternoon of the first day to the morning of the fourth day, often Monday afternoon through Thursday morning. Additional time will be required to accommodate the on-site review of certain extension sites. Because accrediting staff should be present for some part of each comprehensive evaluation, dates will be negotiated that fit both school and accrediting staff calendars. In the case of joint or concurrent evaluations with regional agencies, the scheduling will be coordinated with the regional agency.

Appointment of the Committee

Approximately six to nine months before the evaluation, the accrediting staff will begin the work of appointing members of the accreditation evaluation committee. Committees for evaluations conducted by the Commission alone typically have three to five members. Joint Commission-regional committees are generally larger. While the selection of committee members is primarily a function of the Board through its staff, schools will be consulted frequently regarding the kinds of expertise most needed by committee members, the number of committee members, and identification of candidates for appointment. A school may object to the appointment of a committee member on the basis of a potential conflict of interest, which is defined in the Board's *Policy Manual*. The appointment of committee members is, finally, the prerogative of the Board.

Individuals are appointed to Commission evaluation committees on the basis of their expertise, general knowledge of theological education, and capacity to evaluate an institution in terms of its own mission and the accrediting standards. Evaluation committees will include a ministry practitioner and, for schools with comprehensive distance education programs, a member with expertise in the area of distance education. To the extent possible, committee appointments reflect the diversity of denominations, racial/ethnic character, national context, and gender present among Commission member schools. The final roster of evaluators is sent to the school approximately three months prior to the evaluation.

Making Local Arrangements

Institutions are responsible for making the local arrangements for the committee's visit as described in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics.

In making arrangements for lodging, schools should be mindful that committee members have a great deal of work to accomplish in a very short period of time. The school's efforts to provide gracious hosting and comfortable housing will facilitate this work. Well in advance of the evaluation, the school should arrange for single room accommodations for committee members and staff at a comfortable, nearby hotel. Hotel rooms should have desks and adequate space for the committee

members to work and relax. If possible, the hotel should have restaurant service. Typically, the school should reserve rooms for three nights for a comprehensive evaluation and two nights for a focused evaluation. Occasionally, an evaluator may require a fourth night's accommodation for a comprehensive evaluation because of distance or time zone changes, or to obtain reduced airfare. Schools are not responsible for more than four nights of lodging for any evaluator. The school should arrange to be billed directly by the hotel for the charges for rooms and meals eaten at the hotel. Schools are not responsible for other personal expenses of committee members or staff (e.g., long distance calls, laundry, etc.).

The school should arrange meeting spaces for the committee, both at the hotel and on campus. The hotel meeting room could be the sitting area of a suite, if it is of sufficient size to provide comfortable work space for the committee, or a separate meeting room in the hotel. Committees will typically use the hotel meeting space several hours on the opening day of the evaluation, and late afternoons and evenings each of the two full days of the evaluation. The school should also provide an office or room on the campus for the exclusive use of the committee. This room should be large enough to accommodate both full committee meetings and individual work space. It should also contain the documents, records, exhibits, and supporting material referenced in the self-study. (See a fuller description of these resources below.) The school should consult the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics and accrediting staff for details on the specific technological resources required.

The school will plan transportation in consultation with the chair of the committee and the accrediting staff member in accordance with the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics.

Preparation of Evaluation Schedule

Prior to the committee's arrival, the school and the chair of the committee with the assistance of the accrediting staff should together develop a schedule of activities. This schedule should be as complete as possible, even though changes may be needed during the evaluation. To expedite making these changes, the school should designate one individual to work with the committee to schedule new interviews, arrange schedule changes, or provide additional documentation.

Chapter Four of the *Self-Study Handbook* contains an outline of a typical schedule for a comprehensive evaluation. All comprehensive evaluations will require most of the activities outlined in that typical schedule, and the chair of the committee and the school may negotiate a different sequence of the various activities.

Commission evaluations typically begin with an afternoon committee meeting and an opening social function (typically a small reception or modest dinner) that provides an opportunity for the evaluation committee to meet the chief administrative officer and other appropriate members of the school community, to discuss the schedule, and to make any last-minute arrangements for the evaluation. The balance of the evening should be left free for the committee's working session. The first full day of the evaluation usually begins with an interview with the chief administrative officer. This interview is typically followed by individual interviews with other administrators (e.g., academic dean, business officer, student services administrator, director of the library, and chief development officer). During the two full days of a comprehensive evaluation, committee members will interview most or all full-time faculty members, representative part-time faculty members, representative groups of students enrolled in each of the degree programs, recent graduates, field placement supervisors, and members of the governing board. These interviews should ordinarily be conducted during the day, and evenings should be free for the committee to meet in executive sessions and for individual members to work on their sections of the report. On the morning of the final day of the evaluation, the committee will present to the chief administrative officer an oral report of its recommendations to the Board. It is Commission policy that this oral report be limited to reading the committee's formal recommendations. Representatives of the school may ask questions for clarification and may not otherwise engage committee members regarding their report. The chair or accrediting staff member will also review the procedures following the evaluation and preceding the Board action and remind the school representatives that this preliminary report should not be made public until the Board has acted.

While every effort should be made to have a complete schedule prepared in advance, the school should also anticipate that the evaluators may require changes in the advance schedule. The time constraints

of the evaluation may require the committee to adjust the schedule in order to gather the necessary information while on site, although meetings that have been scheduled with groups (students, graduates, trustees, field placement supervisors, etc.) will not be adjusted after the evaluation begins. Because the schedule may be changed during the evaluation, the school should alert its faculty and staff to be available on short notice during the two full days of the evaluation.

Distribution of Self-Study Reports and Related Material

The school is responsible for distributing copies of the self-study report, appendices, and all related material to the Commission office and members of the accreditation evaluation committee. Details regarding the format and distribution of the self-study are found in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics. In addition to the self-study, evaluators typically receive additional supporting documentation including the current budget and the most recent audit and management letter, administrative and student handbooks, and summary assessment materials. Schools receiving joint Commission-regional evaluations are accountable to both the Commission deadlines and the deadlines of the regional agency, which may differ.

Additional Materials to Be Available during the Evaluation

Committee members should receive most of the materials they need for their work prior to the evaluation, and schools should gather supplemental reference materials for use by the committee during the evaluation. The Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics includes a detailed list of these documents. Among these materials are copies of minutes of faculty meetings and trustee meetings (last five years), copies of prior audits and management letters (last three years), Annual Report Forms (last two years), current institutional planning documents, course syllabi, current faculty curricula vitae and samples of faculty publications, samples of students' theses and dissertations, and copies of promotional materials. This material should be available in the room set aside for committee work.

Support during the Evaluation

Most of the institution's work will be completed prior to the arrival of the accreditation evaluation committee. The institution's primary responsibilities during the evaluation itself include hosting committee

members, participating in interviews, and attending to the logistical details of the committee's stay.

The school should host the committee in ways that enable its members to remain focused on their tasks. Helpful forms of hospitality include simple amenities such as providing coffee, tea, juice, and snacks in the room used by the committee while it is on campus and placing a small hospitality basket in committee members' rooms at the hotel. Commission evaluators contribute approximately one week of time to the school on behalf of the Commission and serve without honorarium. Institutional attention to hosting committee members reflects the school's awareness of the effort these peers are making. While taking care to host the committee appropriately, schools should avoid giving gifts of value or treating evaluators in ways that could appear to be courting a positive evaluation.

A designated contact person from the school should be available to the committee chair at all times during the evaluation. The chair will depend on this person, during the day or evening, to arrange changes in the interview schedule, answer questions, secure additional documentation, etc. The school should be prepared, on short notice, to accommodate requests for changes in the schedule or for additional information. Commission committee members are judicious in their requests, but their task requires them to assess all appropriate information carefully, and they frequently discover they need information that neither they nor the school anticipated in advance.

All faculty and senior administrators, except those on leave at the time of the evaluation, should be available during the evaluation. Persons who are on leave who carry significant institutional roles (e.g., department head or program director) should be prepared to be available by Internet conferencing or conference call. If the evaluation occurs on a day when classes are not usually scheduled, faculty should be asked to be on campus or otherwise available to the committee. While the school should prepare for this availability, it should also caution individuals that the committee may not interview all of them. In the limited time of the evaluation, the committee can focus on only some of the many important issues and typically cannot meet individually with all stakeholders.

Activities Following the Evaluation

By Board policy, the chief administrative officer and others of his or her choosing will receive an oral statement of the committee's recommendations to the Board at the exit conference. After the committee leaves, the school has several remaining activities in the accreditation evaluation process, including identification of factual errors in the draft of the committee's report, preparing a response to the final report for the Board, paying the Commission invoice for costs associated with the evaluation, and completing the comprehensive evaluation of the Commission accrediting process.

Responding to the Draft Report

Following the evaluation, the chair will prepare a draft of the committee's report that includes the committee's findings, its narrative evaluation of the institution, and its recommendations to the Board. *The school should not publish any part of the draft committee report, including its recommendations to the Board.* Even the committee's final report is a communication to the Board, which the Board shares with the school, not an official action. The official action is the form of the committee's recommendation adopted by the Board.

As soon as possible after the evaluation, the chair will complete a draft of the committee's report and then send this draft to the chief administrative officer of the school for review and preliminary response. This response is limited to corrections of factual errors and should be returned to the chair of the committee. After carefully considering the school's response, the chair, in consultation with other committee members, will prepare and submit the final report to the Board. Accrediting staff will send the final report to the school with an invitation to respond. In joint evaluations with regional associations, the agent named in the joint agreement will take responsibility for sending the report to the regional agency's offices as required.

Responding to the Final Report

When the school receives the final report from the Board, there are two options for responding. One is to prepare a written response to the report and recommendations for consideration by the Board. This response, typically in the form of a letter from the school's chief administrative officer, may state the school's concurrence with the

committee's findings and recommendations, or it may challenge the committee's report and recommendations, in whole or in part. This response to the committee report is the proper forum for expressing any disagreement with the judgments of the committee or for challenging its recommendations.

The other means of response available to the school is to appear before the Board at the meeting during which the committee report and recommendations are being considered. By Commission policy, any school that has received an evaluation committee evaluation may present their concerns in person at the meeting of the Board in which the report of that evaluation is being considered for action. The school will meet with the Board workgroup considering the Board's response or with the whole Board, depending upon the nature of the school's concerns. (See *Policy Manual* [II.B.11] for further details.) The accrediting staff liaison is prepared to provide counsel to schools regarding preparation of a letter of response or scheduling a meeting with the Board.

Invoice for Evaluation-Related Expenses

Dues paid by member schools support most of the ongoing costs of Commission accreditation. In accordance with Commission policy, all travel costs directly related to an accrediting evaluation are charged to the school being evaluated, together with an assessment fee. The school will be billed for average travel costs for evaluators and staff and the assessment fee as determined by the Board and posted on the ATS website and published in the *Bulletin*. The assessment fee covers Commission costs associated with preparation for accrediting evaluations, committee expenses, and other costs related to the accreditation evaluation process. Invoices are mailed at the end of the semester in which the evaluation occurs and are payable upon receipt.

Board Consideration of Committee Reports

The Board meets in February and June. The Board typically considers reports from fall evaluations in February, and reports from spring evaluations in June. For comprehensive evaluations, the Board's decision-making process includes consideration of the self-study report, the evaluation committee report, the institutional response, and the counsel of staff present for the evaluation. The Board will take action according to formally adopted procedures and based on the

committee's report, the standards of accreditation, and actions taken with respect to other member institutions in similar circumstances.

The action of the Board, following the format of the recommendation in evaluation committee reports, will have four basic parts. The first part is an action on initial or reaffirmation of accreditation, including the length of the grant of accreditation. Second, the Board will formally act on the approval of each degree program offered by the institution, with separate actions for a distance education program and any extension site at which an approved degree can be earned. Third, the Board's action will describe areas of distinctive strength in the institution that should be sustained. Finally, the action will cite any areas where one or more elements of the standards require further attention by the school. With regard to these latter areas, the Board may impose notations or probation or require follow-up activities such as reports and focused evaluations, as appropriate.

A letter reporting the Board action will be mailed no later than 30 days from the date of the Board meeting. Actions related to accredited status, approval of degree programs, and imposition of notations and probation are published annually in the *Membership List* and on the website.

Appeal Procedures

An institution has thirty days following receipt of the Board action letter to appeal a decision. Actions under appeal are not published in the *Membership List* or on the website until the appeal is resolved. Appeal procedures vary according to the action under appeal and are fully described in the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures*, Section XI: Appeals of Actions by the Board of Commissioners.

Evaluation of Commission Accreditation Process

After all activities related to the accreditation evaluation process have been completed, concluding with delivery of the letter reporting the Board action, the Commission invites schools to complete an evaluation of the accreditation process—from the initial staff contact through the evaluation to the Board action. Completion of this evaluation is an important contribution to the Board's own evaluative efforts to monitor its processes and procedures in service to improving the contribution of this process to the overall purpose of the Commission and the Association—the improvement of theological schools.

Checklist of Activities for Receiving a Commission Evaluation Committee

The following checklist is a summary guide for schools preparing for a Commission accreditation evaluation. It should be supplemented, as appropriate, to reflect the school's individual plans and to incorporate activities required by regional accrediting agencies, in the case of a joint or concurrent Commission-regional evaluation.

Before the Evaluation

- Prepare and distribute copies of the completed self-study report and supporting materials as directed in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics.
- Contact the chair about schedule of interviews and administrative details of the evaluation.
- Confirm hotel arrangements, including single room accommodations for each committee member and a space at the hotel for committee working sessions.
- After the tentative schedule has been negotiated with the committee chair, distribute it in advance to administrative staff, faculty, governing board members, and other persons involved, with a caveat about changes.
- Plan a modest opening social event and determine the institutional representatives who will participate.

During the Evaluation

- Designate a contact person for the committee to arrange schedule changes, provide additional documentation, etc.
- Provide such transportation for the committee related to the evaluation as arranged prior to the evaluation with the chair of the committee.
- Assure availability of persons scheduled for interviews.
- Check occasionally with the committee members to be certain that they have everything they need for their work.

After the Evaluation

- Examine the draft of the committee's report carefully and send corrections of factual errors (inaccuracies or misrepresentations) to the committee chair within the time frame set out in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics.

- Send a response directly to the Board following receipt of the final report. This response is the proper forum for expressing agreement or disagreement with the interpretations, judgments, or recommendations of the evaluation committee and for raising issues that the school would like the Board to be aware of when it considers the committee's report. Schools are not required to respond, but some response is desirable.
- If preferred, arrange to send a representative to the Board's meeting at which the evaluation committee's report and recommendation will be considered. Schools wishing to have representation at the Board meeting should make the request directly to the accrediting staff, who will schedule a time during the Board meeting for the institutional representatives.
- Complete the evaluation survey form that will be sent by accrediting staff after the school has been notified of the Board's formal action.

Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics

These guidelines include descriptive and prescriptive information about the self-study report, transportation, accommodations, documentation, and time lines.

Self-Study Report

Length

The maximum length of the section on General Institutional Standards 1–8 is 75 pages. In addition, analysis of each degree program standard should be eight to 10 pages, addressing sections 1–4 of each degree program. The length of ES, the educational standard, will vary depending upon whether the school has one or more extension sites and whether it offers distance education.

Line Spacing and Format

Please single-space the report and print it double sided. In addition to the title and name of the institution, please include on the cover page, the date (year and month) of the visit. In addition to print copies, the Board of Commissioners requires that the self-study report and appendices also be available to the Commission, Commissioners, and comprehensive evaluation committee members electronically.

Distribution

Schools hosting an evaluation visit for reaffirmation of accreditation must distribute the following materials as described here (schools hosting a visit for *initial* accreditation submit materials to the Commission office by April 1 and December 1):

- 60 days before the visit, send these four items to the Commission office:
 - Two coil-bound, double-sided copies of the self-study report (without appendices), with the report typically not exceeding 150 pages
 - Two duplicate USB flash drives, each with two PDF files: the self-study report **and** appendices (with all appendices combined into one PDF file and bookmarked; see “Materials to Accompany the Self-Study” later in this document)

- 45 days before the visit, send these two items to **each** member of the evaluation committee:
 - One coil-bound, doubled-sided copy of the self-study report (without appendices), with reports typically not exceeding 150 pages
 - One USB flash drive, with two PDF files: the self-study report **and** appendices (with all appendices combined into one PDF file and bookmarked; see “Materials to Accompany the Self-Study” later in this document)

NOTE: Each printed self-study report should have a table of contents that clearly labels each section with page references. Each electronic set of appendices should be bookmarked (a feature of PDF files), so each section is easy to access.

Institutions that are dually accredited and receive permission from Commission staff to host a joint or coordinated visit should note that some regional accrediting agencies have different timetables for distributing self-study materials, and those timetables for that other agency must also be followed.

Please see the section on documentation later in these guidelines for information regarding the additional, supporting documentation for the evaluation that will need to be gathered and made available.

The Evaluation Committee

The school will receive the final roster of evaluators approximately three months prior to the evaluation.

Transportation

The chair of the committee and the accrediting staff member who will participate in the evaluation and the school will reach a consensus on the provision of transportation for the committee, from the airport upon arrival, during the evaluation, and to the airport for departure. Committee members and accrediting staff will make their own plane reservations and inform the school of their plans but will submit those expenses for reimbursement to the ATS Commission office, not to the school.

Accommodations

In making arrangements for lodging, schools should be mindful that committee members have a great deal of work to accomplish in a very short period of time. The school's efforts to provide gracious hosting and comfortable housing will facilitate this work. Well in advance of the evaluation, the school should arrange for single room accommodations for committee members and staff at a comfortable, nearby hotel. Hotel rooms should have desks and adequate space for the committee member to work and relax. It is common for the school to provide a small hospitality basket in each committee member's hotel room. If possible, the hotel should have restaurant service, which is where the committee usually eats breakfast. Committees typically request recommendations for local restaurants for evening meals on the second and third days, which (unlike all other meals during the visit) are paid by staff and later charged back to the school as part of the end-of-semester invoice for the visit fee. Schools usually need to arrange transportation to any local restaurants for the committee, unless other arrangements are made with staff or the chair. Noon meals are usually provided by the school on campus while the committee meets with students (first full day) and trustees (second full day). The opening dinner (evening before the first full day) is hosted by the school at a place of its choice (on campus or at a nearby restaurant).

Typically, the school should reserve rooms for three nights for a comprehensive evaluation and one or two nights for a focused evaluation. Occasionally, an evaluator may require a fourth night's accommodation for a comprehensive evaluation because of distance or time zone changes or to obtain reduced airfare. Schools are not responsible for more than four nights of lodging for any evaluator. The school should arrange to be billed directly by the hotel for the costs of rooms and any meals (usually breakfasts) eaten at the hotel. Schools are not responsible for other personal, incidental expenses of committee members or accrediting staff (e.g., long distance calls, laundry, etc.).

The school should arrange meeting and work space for the committee, both at the hotel and on campus, and should review the details with the chair and accrediting staff. The hotel meeting room could be the sitting area of a suite, if it is of sufficient size to provide comfortable work space for the committee, or a separate meeting room in the hotel. Committees will typically use the hotel meeting space several

hours on the opening day of the evaluation and possibly late afternoons and evenings each of the two full days of the evaluation.

The school should also provide an office or workroom on the campus for the exclusive use of the committee. This space should be large enough to accommodate both full committee meetings and individual work space. It should also serve as the Documents Room, containing the documents, records, exhibits, and supporting material referenced in the self-study and described in the following section. The workroom should have one or two computers, Internet access, a projector, and a printer. The room should also be secure with keys provided, if possible, to committee members since they typically leave personal items in that room. The school should also provide each day in that room simple amenities such as coffee, tea, juice, bottled water, ice, and snacks (chips, cookies, nuts, fruit) for use by the committee while it is on campus.

Documentation

The school is responsible for distributing copies of the self-study report, appendices, and all related material to the Commission office and members of the accreditation evaluation committee. Information about preparation and distribution of the self-study appears at the beginning of these guidelines. A copy of the self-study and documentation sent to the Commission on Accrediting and evaluation committee members should also be placed in the Documents Room.

Historically, schools undergoing comprehensive (or initial) evaluation have been required to provide paper copies of various documents in a Documents Room. Those documents were in printed form and physically located in a secure room on campus for the evaluation committee's review while on campus. Increasingly, schools are asking if some or all of those documents could be provided instead electronically in what might be called a "Virtual Documents Room." A Virtual Documents Room is acceptable, provided these five conditions are met: (1) the electronic documents are clearly organized according to the Commission Standards and appropriately referenced in the self-study report; (2) the electronic documents are clearly labeled and easily accessed without any undue difficulty; (3) the school still provides a physical Documents Room for certain documents that are not easily shared electronically (e.g., faculty publications, student dissertations, printed promotional materials, etc.); (4) the physical Documents

Room has a dedicated computer and printer that allows committee members to view and print one or more documents as needed to do their work well; and (5) the evaluation committee still has the option of requesting before the visit one or more documents be printed for its review. Please keep in mind that all schools are still required to submit a USB flash drive that contains electronic versions of those supporting materials to accompany the self-study that are listed below. Schools desiring to have a Virtual Documents Room should consult early on with their ATS Commission staff liaison, preferably at least six months before the visit.

Materials to Accompany the Self-Study

While a school may include in its self-study report hyperlinks to a number of supporting documents, certain supporting materials **must** be included in the appendices to the self-study report (formatted as a single PDF file on a flash drive with each item in that single file bookmarked; see “Distribution” discussion above). Items that must be included in the appendices to the self-study report are listed below and are the only items that should be included as appendices. In addition, certain other items (see second list below) **must** be provided in the Documents Room (see preceding discussion regarding physical vs. virtual documents rooms). If there is any question as to what to include in any of these materials or how to format them, please contact the school’s ATS accrediting staff liaison.

Items to Include in the Appendices to the Self-Study Report (which must be combined into a single PDF file and bookmarked):

- Current organizational chart, showing names and titles of all key administrative personnel
- Current strategic plan
- Assessment plan (analysis of assessment results should be incorporated into the self-study report; current assessment instruments and results should be provided in the Documents Room per the instructions below)
- Current budget (if embedded school, include budget for theological unit/entity) and a three- to five-year budget plan (per Standard 8, section 8.2.2.4)

- Most recent fiscal year audit and management letter
- Handbooks: Board, faculty, staff, and student
- Academic catalog (schools may use terms other than *catalog*, but there must be some public and permanent document that communicates clearly all appropriate academic policies and requirements, especially those described in Standard 2, sections 2.3 and 2.9; and Standard 6, sections 6.2.1, 6.3.1, 6.3.5, and 6.3.6, including any required by federal or provincial regulations)
- Targeted Issues Checklist (a copy with the schools' portion completed)

Items to Provide in the Documents Room

In addition to a copy of the self-study and supplementary materials sent in advance, the Documents Room should contain the following:

- Minutes of governing board and faculty meetings for last five years
- Audited financial statements with management letters for the three years prior to the most recent ones provided in advance, including A-133 audits (if conducted)
- Annual Report Forms for last two years
- Most recent Strategic Information Report (published every other year and covering 10 years of data); if the school participates in any of the following, please also include the last three years of the Institutional Peer Profile Report, Entering Student Questionnaire, Graduating Student Questionnaire, and Alumni/ae Questionnaire
- Current institutional planning documents (strategic planning to include enrollment, financial, and development plans/goals)
- Syllabi (include representative samples of courses taught in every program by various faculty, as well as samples of courses taught in every delivery format [e.g., traditional, intensive, off-campus, online, etc.])
- Current faculty CVs and access to transcripts showing advanced degrees
- Samples of faculty publications
- Samples of student theses
- Copy of promotional materials

- Current assessment instruments and results for each degree program for the last three to five years
- Graduation rates, average length of time to complete the program, and placements (by degree program) in degree-related careers for last five years (if not in self-study)
- Library collection development plan
- Copy of the most recent evaluation visit report by another accrediting agency (US Schools) or provincial agency (some Canadian schools)
- Targeted Issues Checklist (in addition to appending a completed copy of this checklist to the self-study report as noted above, schools must also place all appropriate documentation called for by the checklist in the Documents Room in a separate file marked “Targeted Issues” and organized by each numbered item on the checklist, following instructions found there)

Time Lines

Before the Evaluation

Two years before the academic year in which the comprehensive evaluation visit is scheduled: invitation to the annual self-study workshop.

One year out: Consultation with the chief administrative officer about the date of the evaluation, including visits to extension sites.

Six to nine months out: consultation with the chief administrative officer about the appointment of the comprehensive evaluation committee.

As soon as the evaluation committee is formed: School receives committee roster together with directions on soliciting information regarding travel arrangements and other preferences.

After the Evaluation

Two weeks later: School receives draft of report and recommendations from the chair.

Two weeks following: School returns draft to chair with factual corrections.

Less than one week following: Chair delivers final report with recommendations to Commission, and accrediting staff sends final report with recommendations to the school's chief administrative officer.

Within four weeks (of receiving the draft report): School responds to the report, directing its remarks to the Board of Commissioners. The school may also choose to address the Board in person at its regularly scheduled meeting, providing the school a total of at least eight weeks to formulate a response.

After the Meeting of the Board of Commissioners

After the meeting of the Board of Commissioners in which the self-study, evaluation committee report and recommendations, and the school's response are considered:

Within 30 days: School receives the action letter from the Board of Commissioners.

Within 30 days of receipt of the action letter: Deadline for appealing certain actions, including failure to approve new degrees, extension sites, or distance education programs; the imposition of a notation or probation; or an adverse action.

At the conclusion, the Board of Commissioners will request of the school an evaluation of all aspects of the self-study process, the evaluation, and the Board's action.

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK
CHAPTER FOUR

*Guidelines for Members
of Accreditation Evaluation Committees*

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Introduction

The *Bylaws* of the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (“Commission”) identify its central purpose as follows: “to establish standards of theological education and to maintain a list of institutions accredited on the basis of such standards. . . .” The Board of Commissioners of the Commission (“Board”) has responsibility for accomplishing this purpose and discharges its responsibility primarily through the *accreditation evaluation process*, which involves a variety of accrediting practices such as evaluations by peer committees, follow-up reports, consideration of petitions and actions related to the accreditation of institutions, and required accrediting staff visits to institutions.

The guidelines in this chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* are based on the policies and procedures that the Commission on Accrediting or its Board has adopted and the practices the Board has developed to fulfill its responsibilities as an accrediting body. These include (1) the qualifications, appointment, and expectations of evaluation committee members; (2) the work of the evaluation committee—preparation for the evaluation, conducting the evaluation, and tasks that follow the evaluation; (3) a typical schedule for an accreditation evaluation; and (4) administrative procedures and policies. Committee members are expected to be familiar with these guidelines and to conduct their work according to these expectations.

Types of Evaluations

There are several different kinds of evaluations of schools.

- An **initial accreditation evaluation** occurs, following the Board's review of the initial self-study report, in order to evaluate a theological school for initial accreditation by the Board.
- **Comprehensive evaluations** are made to schools that have completed a self-study and are seeking reaffirmation of accreditation.
- **Focused evaluations** occur either because a school is petitioning for approval of certain new programs, or establishing a new location at which 50 percent or more of the credits required for an approved program will be offered, or because the Board has determined that some concern at a school is sufficient to warrant an evaluation.

All these evaluations depend on the skill and thoughtful work of individuals who are willing to serve the larger community of theological schools as members of accreditation evaluation committees.

Qualifications, Appointment, and Expectations of Evaluation Committee Members

Qualifications

Persons are invited to serve on Commission evaluation committees who essentially meet the following qualifications: (1) expertise in aspects of theological education or higher education (including distance education for evaluations of those institutions that offer distance education), (2) capacity to evaluate an institution on the basis of the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, (3) openness to the range of confessional and religious traditions represented by the schools in the Commission, and (4) capacity to work effectively as a member of an evaluation committee. A ministry practitioner will be appointed to each committee. Evaluation committees should reflect the diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and ecclesial communities present in member schools.

Appointment

ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures* and the *Policy Manual* (III.A.2.b) outline the approved policies regarding the appointment of accreditation committee members. Most of these policies were developed to avoid conflicts of interest and to ensure knowledgeable and objective evaluation of institutions. Specific examples of conflicts of interest are provided in the *Policy Manual* (I.C.2.d).

Expectations

The credibility and the effectiveness of the accreditation process depend upon the contribution of committee members. The Board expects committee members to conduct evaluations according to established guidelines and to prepare reports that are fair, accurate, and informative. Sensitive adherence to these various expectations is necessary for accreditation to ensure quality and to contribute to the improvement of theological education in the United States and Canada.

Confidentiality. Evaluation committee members in the process of an evaluation necessarily have access to all aspects of an institution's life. Strengths, as well as weaknesses, faults, and disagreements, are revealed in accreditation evaluations. Evaluators must deal with this information confidentially and may not discuss it apart from the evaluation committee's deliberations. The confidentiality necessary for

Commission accreditation evaluations has several dimensions. First, evaluators must not conduct interviews in ways that reveal information obtained in other interviews. Second, evaluators must refrain from discussing anything related either to the findings of the committee or to its recommendations to the Board with anyone other than committee members or accrediting staff. Third, the self-study report and other school documents reviewed by the committee often contain very sensitive information; committee members should destroy any of those documents in their possession after the visit once they review the initial draft sent by the committee chair. Confidentiality is absolutely critical for accreditation committee members, and committee members must be careful to observe these forms of confidentiality.

Avoiding Conflicts of Interest. Committee members are responsible for avoiding conflicts of interest that could interfere with their objective evaluation of the institution. Conflicts of interest are described in the *Policy Manual* (I.C.2.d). Before each evaluation visit, evaluation committee members are required to sign a Conflict of Interest form.

Maintaining the Tone and Character of Commission Accreditation.

Accrediting agencies approach their work in various ways. Over the years, the Commission has developed a tone and character to its accreditation efforts, which should be reflected in the work of committee members. The overarching goal of Commission accreditation is the improvement of theological education. Improvement is supported by a committee's careful identification of areas of strength, areas of deficiency, and areas that should be the focus of ongoing institutional attention. Commission accreditation functions in a collegial way. Peer evaluators from theological schools engage in thoughtful, fair, and objective evaluation that presses for quality by holding Commission member schools accountable to the understandings of good theological education as defined by Standards of Accreditation adopted by the schools. Committees should emphasize quality and support the school's goal of improvement by attending to the normative expectations in higher education and by maintaining an awareness of the contribution of good theological schools to North American religious life.

Discipline of Theological Perspective. The Commission *Bylaws* restrict membership to schools within the Christian or Jewish traditions, but within this restriction exists a wide diversity of convictions and theological perspectives. The integrity of evaluations requires that

committee members focus on the institutional and educational mission of the school being evaluated, even though its theological position may be widely divergent from the evaluators' own. The Standards of Accreditation deal forthrightly with the theological nature of the theological school, but they do not require or permit evaluators to make theological judgments about institutions. Accreditation committees are typically appointed to include members from schools both theologically similar to and different from the school being evaluated. Evaluators serve the entire community of theological schools by evaluating each school in the context of its particular and specific mission, the Standards of Accreditation, and the religious constituency it serves.

The Work of Commission Evaluation Committees

An accreditation evaluation committee is convened for the purpose of evaluating one school. While evaluators may be invited to serve on other committees, they will likely not serve with the same individuals more than once. Committees for comprehensive evaluations are usually formed six to nine months in advance of the evaluation; committees for focused evaluations are smaller and are usually formed two to three months before the evaluation. Committee members are responsible for preparing for the evaluation, for conducting the evaluation by specified guidelines, and for contributing to the completion of the report following the evaluation.

Before the Evaluation

Before the evaluation, committee members are expected to read

- this chapter of the *Handbook*, “Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees” and those noted in the subsection below, *Several Guidelines for Committee Members*,
- the Standards of Accreditation,
- the report of the institutional self-study and supporting documents, and
- the materials about the institution provided by the Board.

Also prior to the evaluation, the chair of the committee will discuss areas of responsibility with each committee member and make writing and interview assignments.

Evaluation committees will typically hold at least one conference call, about a month before the evaluation. The goals of the conference call are to enable the committee members to share concerns they have identified in the self-study report, to identify particular members of the institutional community with whom they will need to meet as a part of the on-site data-gathering process, and to describe particular resources they will need to review, firsthand, on site.

Several Guidelines for Committee Members. This chapter of the *Handbook*, “Guidelines for Members of Accreditation Evaluation Committees,” describes most aspects of the accreditation evaluation process. In addition to these guidelines, committee members should read Chapter One of the *Handbook*, “An Introduction to Accreditation

by the Commission on Accrediting,” and Chapter Five, “Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation.”

Commission Standards of Accreditation. The Commission Standards of Accreditation are published in the Accrediting section of the ATS website as are the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures* (“*Procedures*”). The current Standards and *Procedures* were adopted in two phases, in 2010 and in 2012, at the conclusion of a four-year project to revise the 1996 Standards.

Report of the Institutional Self-Study and Supporting Documents. Prior to the evaluation, the school will send each committee member (1) the report of the institutional self-study, (2) appendices related to the self-study, (3) a current catalog, and (4) other supporting materials that the school may choose to provide. Preparation includes a general reading and overview of this material and a more focused, careful reading of all sections for which the evaluator has primary responsibility. Institutions having a focused evaluation will provide to committee members, instead of a self-study, the specific documentation identified in the prospectus.

Materials about the Evaluation Provided by the Board. The Board will send to each committee member several items that provide some historical information about the institution.

- The **Report** of the most recent comprehensive evaluation contains the findings of the previous evaluation committee. Evaluators should note the strengths and areas of concern identified by the previous committee, as well as its recommendations to the Board. The Board may not have adopted all the recommendations of the previous committee, and schools are not bound by the report but by the resultant actions of the Board. This report does, however, provide perspective, and current evaluators should explore how the school has responded to previous evaluations.
- The **Accreditation History** of the institution provides a brief summary of the actions of the Board, covering as much as a 25-year period; this summary will include the Board’s formal actions following the most recent comprehensive evaluation and any intervening actions.

- The ***Institutional Fact Sheet*** provides a three-year statistical summary of the institution that is computed from data supplied by the school on its Annual Report Forms, including information about enrollment, faculty size, institutional income and expenditures, and library acquisitions and expenditures.

Prior to the evaluation, the committee chairperson will discuss areas of responsibility with each committee member and make assignments.

New Evaluators. In advance of their service on an evaluation committee, new evaluators will receive training in the content and interpretation of the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation and the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures*, including the review and evaluation of distance education. First-time evaluators will also receive training through online training sessions.

During the Evaluation

The overarching goal of an accreditation evaluation is the evaluation of a theological school in terms of the Standards adopted by the Commission. The Standards describe a model of evaluation that is central to the institution's self-study and also serves as a guide to the work of an accreditation committee. When this model is translated into the activities of the evaluation committee, the particular work of the committee includes the following:

Examining Purpose and Goals. Commission accreditation begins with the purpose and goals of the institution, and the work of accreditation committees necessarily begins at the same point. What is the central purpose of this school? What are its primary educational goals? What are its major institutional goals? An accreditation committee evaluates purpose and goals in two ways. The first is to determine if the institution has thoughtfully identified its purpose and goals in ways that guide the school and are evident in its evaluation efforts. The second is to determine if the institution's purpose and educational goals conform to the normative expectations of the Standards of Accreditation. The Standards allow considerable latitude to schools regarding institutional purpose and the educational goals for its degree programs, and committees should be respectful of this latitude. The Standards of Accreditation, however, do have a normative function that places limits on the purposes a school within the Commission may adopt.

Data Gathering. In accreditation evaluations, committee members gather data to provide the basis for evaluating all aspects of the school. Generally, data are gathered by two means: by interviewing individuals and groups and by examining institutional documents and records.

Interviews provide an open-ended means of gathering perceptions, concerns, and opinions about the institution and its educational programs. Through interviews, evaluators can learn how individuals in the school view the content and recommendations of the self-study report, the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and other issues regarding the school's attention to the Standards of Accreditation. Committee members should prepare questions before the interviews and should focus on listening during the interviews. They should avoid interjecting their counsel and shall also avoid making comparisons of the school being evaluated with the evaluator's own institution. Interviews should be guided toward substantive assessment of important issues for the school and not merely the airing of individual complaints.

Evaluators also gather data by examining institutional records and documents that will be available during the evaluation. These materials can provide a basis for evaluating claims in the self-study or perceptions obtained during interviews. The kinds of institutional records typically reviewed in a comprehensive evaluation include institutional strategic plans; audits; course syllabi; admission records; minutes of faculty and board meetings; handbooks developed for trustees, faculty-staff, and students; curricula vitae of faculty; samples of faculty publications; and samples of students' theses and dissertations. Committee members should consult Chapter Five of the *Handbook*, "Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation," for guidance in posing interview questions and examining institutional records and documents.

Forming an Overall Evaluation through Deliberations. The primary purpose of the committee's deliberations on-site is to develop a comprehensive evaluation of the institution. This evaluation should be based on the institutional analysis and assessment in the report of the self-study and on the data gathered by the committee in interviews and review of documents. Throughout the evaluation, committee members must share information, collaborate, and consult with one another. Accreditation committees are small enough that each

member must assume responsibility for several areas of investigation and for helping the committee come to a broad understanding of the institution. Specific assignments will be made to individuals for exploration and reporting, but conclusions, which take the form of accrediting recommendations, are a shared responsibility of the total group and should reflect the committee's consensus.

Forming a Recommendation about Accreditation. The Board needs a formal recommendation (evaluation) regarding the institution's accredited status with the Commission. While the formal recommendation will refer to particular situations and needs in particular schools, the Board expects each evaluation committee to make recommendations in four distinct areas: (1) a recommendation regarding accreditation and a date for the next comprehensive evaluation; (2) a recommendation regarding the approval of each of the degree programs offered by the school, of each extension site (if any) where a full-degree program may be earned, and of a comprehensive distance education program (if any); (3) a statement of strengths to be sustained during the grant of accreditation; and (4) areas where the Standards require further attention reflected, as appropriate, by the requirement of follow-up reports or focused evaluations or by the imposition of notations or probation.

Writing the Report. The written report of the committee (1) documents its findings, (2) formally forwards its recommendations to the Board, and (3) provides a record of its external, independent evaluation of the school. Each committee member will have responsibility for drafting sections of the report. A good goal would be the completion of the draft while on site, so that only editing would be required after the evaluation.

For purposes of consistency of review across schools, the Board requests that each written report include as background and context the following sections: (1) a brief introduction/history about the school and the evaluation itself, (2) a section on each of the *General Institutional Standards*, (3) a section on the *Educational Standard* and each of the degree programs offered by the institution, and (4) the committee's formal recommendations to the Board. For evaluations conducted jointly or concurrently with a regional agency, the memorandum of agreement between the Board and the regional agency describes variations in report structure.

Effective reports are characterized by a distinctive tone and style. The tone should be descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, the report should identify those facts about an institution that have led to a committee's judgments and should *not* indicate what the institution should do. The report's primary purpose is to present facts, as perceived by the committee, that serve as the basis for the evaluation and recommendations of the committee. Committee members are expected to write in a style that is clear and concise, to focus on the data and observations that led to conclusions and recommendations, and to provide appropriate collegial counsel (suggestions) to the school. Direct references to persons by name should be avoided (i.e., "one professor said" rather than "Professor Smith said"). The report should describe problems that may be a result of personnel issues in terms of the *problem*, not in terms of the *individual* responsible (i.e., "the financial record keeping is inadequate" rather than "the incompetence of the financial officer is likely a problem"). The report should draw attention to issues, problems, and strengths without implying doubts about the institution's wisdom or the competence of its staff or faculty. The report should be written in the third person with no first person singular expressions, emphasizing the consensus of the committee in its authorship. Generally, reports should be as brief as the data and their evaluation will allow; many reports will not exceed 20 single-spaced pages.

After the Evaluation

The chair will edit the report and coordinate its distribution. This process involves sending copies of the first draft of the full report to each member of the evaluation committee for review and response. The chair will send the draft of the report to the school for review of factual errors only. The ATS Commission office and the regional accrediting agency (if involved) will also receive a copy of the draft report. Based on the responses of the school, the chair will prepare a final report and send copies to committee members and the Commission office (and regional agency office if a joint evaluation). The accrediting staff will then send the final copy to the school and invite the institution to respond to the final draft, including challenges to the findings or recommendations, by writing directly to the Board. Ideally, the first draft should be completed and circulated among the committee members within two weeks of the evaluation. The school's report

of factual errors should be returned within two weeks, and the final report completed in the following week. Final reports, then, should be mailed to the Commission within four to five weeks of the evaluation.

Schedule for an Accreditation Evaluation

Each committee determines the schedule that it will use in fulfilling its duties, and most evaluations will follow a schedule of activities like the following:

Arrival Day

An Initial Meeting of the Committee in Executive Session. The first work session affords the opportunity for committee members to become further acquainted with one another, confirm preliminary schedules of interviews and meetings, and check details for the evaluation. In addition to these administrative details, the committee should discuss additional reactions to the self-study following the conference call, review the distinctive issues of the evaluation, note any initial concerns about the institution based on the self-study and related material in the light of the conference call, plan the opening interview with the chief administrative officer, discuss the committee's first analysis of the any issues discerned in the Targeted Issues Checklist, which consists mostly of mandatory requirements, and identify issues for committee members to pursue in their respective interviews. The opening session is also a time when the committee will review the protocols, expectations, and procedures for the conduct of Commission accreditation evaluations.

Opening Dinner or Reception. A modest social event, such as a dinner or reception, hosted by the school, serves as many as four purposes: (1) a time for members of the evaluation committee to meet representatives of the school, typically including the chief administrative officer, director of the self-study, and others the chief administrative officer chooses to invite, (2) the opportunity to review the schedule for the next day's meetings and interviews, (3) an opportunity to state the nature and purpose of the evaluation, and (4) an occasion for the chief administrative officer to set out briefly the school's vision and chief conclusions from the self-study.

First Full Day

Interview with the Chief Administrative Officer. The full committee should meet with the chief officer of the institution and discuss the officer's perceptions of the purpose, present reality, and future of the institution. This conference may be wide-ranging in subjects and

should include some exploration regarding the school's status during the self-study, what has occurred since the self-study was completed, what will be done to follow up on the self-study results, and the issues or challenges the school is currently facing.

Individual Conferences with Other Administrative Officers. Early in the evaluation, individual interviews should be conducted with key leaders of the school, including the academic dean, student services administrator, chief financial officer, chief development officer, and director of the library. These interviews should explore issues of concern in the respective areas, as well as these senior leaders' perspectives regarding the items noted above in the agenda for the conference with the chief administrative officer of the institution.

Conferences with Members of the Faculty. Committee members should conduct interviews with as many members of the faculty as possible, either individually or in small groups, including full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty. Among other issues, faculty should be invited to address their perceptions of the self-study's analysis of the institution, the strengths and weaknesses of the educational programs of the school, and the quality of institutional support for theological scholarship (teaching, learning, and research).

Conferences with Other Administrative Personnel. Members of the committee should interview the registrar, director of admissions, director of computing services, facilities manager, and other administrative personnel regarding issues pertaining to their respective areas of work.

Conferences with a Representative Group or Groups of Students. Members of the committee should interview groups of students currently involved in each of the degree programs offered by the school, as well as groups of women, racial/ethnic minority students, international students, and other significant student groups. These interviews should focus on students' perceptions of the quality of learning and resources, patterns of involvement with faculty and administrators, and the effectiveness of institutional efforts on behalf of students.

Examination of Records, Minutes, and Institutional Documents. Beginning with the first opportunity and continuing through the second day, committee members should begin to review documents available at the institution to verify the evidentiary basis required for the Targeted Issues Checklist and to confirm observations and

conclusions obtained from interviews. These typically include items such as budgets, analyses of revenues and expenditures, faculty and student manuals, administrative charts and manuals, admission and registrar records, course syllabi, term papers, advanced degree theses, annual reports, faculty/committee/trustee minutes, planning documents, and faculty publications and transcripts.

Committee Executive Session. The committee should attempt to conclude its interviews by late afternoon so it can adjourn to its own executive session, at the on-site workroom or the hotel meeting room. During this session, the committee should review its impressions of the first day of interviews, identify tentative conclusions that should be tested during the next day's interviews, identify any additional information needed to be collected the next day, and confirm the agenda for the next day's meetings and interviews.

Second Full Day

Conference with Graduates. Some committee members should meet with a group of recent graduates to explore questions about the adequacy of the theological education provided by the school and other appropriate issues.

Conference with Appropriate Officers in Other Institutions. If an institution is involved in consortial arrangements or otherwise formally shares educational resources with other institutions, some members of the committee should meet with representatives of those other institutions to assess the perceived effectiveness of these agreements and arrangements.

Conference with Field Supervisors. A meeting with supervisors of field education placements provides opportunity to examine the way the school oversees the process, integrates field education with other elements of theological education, and supports the work of supervisors.

Conference with Members of the Governing Board. The full committee should meet with representatives of the school's governing board, ordinarily without the presence of the chief administrative officer or other employees of the institution. The committee should explore issues of governance, the purpose and mission of the school, and the quality of the board's work. This may be a luncheon meeting, although it need not be, and should occur during the second day

of the evaluation unless governing board member travel or specific circumstances of the evaluation require otherwise. Since adequate participation by the governing board is critical and will likely involve travel by some, a decision about “adequate participation” should be made in conversation with the committee chair or accrediting staff or both early in the process so that all board members involved may be advised of the evaluation dates immediately after they are set. The chair of the committee should assume leadership for this meeting.

Other Interviews. Interviews to follow up on issues identified during the first full day or to test tentative conclusions reached in the first full day’s committee executive session should be conducted as appropriate.

Conference with Staff Members. A committee member should meet with a group of nonsenior staff to assess the adequacy of staff numbers for the work to be completed and the quality of the institution’s pattern of supervision and support for staff.

Committee Executive Session. The committee should complete its interviews and examination of records by midafternoon so it can begin an executive session. This meeting should provide opportunity for each committee member to review conclusions reached in his or her area of evaluation and for the committee, as a whole, to come to consensus about its recommendations to the Board. Depending of the complexity of the institution, the specific issues of the evaluation, and the demands of the other agencies participating in the evaluation, this meeting may last from one to three hours, or more. The meeting should conclude as early as possible in the late afternoon to allow time for committee members to continue to develop their respective sections of the report.

Brief Meeting with the School’s Chief Administrative Officer. If the committee is able to reach sufficient clarity and a preliminary consensus by late afternoon on its chief conclusions, it is appropriate for the chair and the accrediting staff member to meet with the chief administrative officer of the school to provide an overview of the conclusions that the evaluation committee will present at the exit interview.

Departure Day

Committee Executive Meeting. The committee typically meets to review its recommendations and to plan for the exit conference.

The Exit Conference. The concluding event of the evaluation is the oral report the committee makes to the institution's chief administrative officer and other staff he or she may choose to invite. The chair states the committee's full recommendation to the Board. The chair or accrediting staff also reviews the next steps in the completion of the report for the Board, including the institution's opportunity for identifying factual errors in the draft and for making a formal response to the Board upon receipt of the final report. The school should be advised not to publish the recommendations of the committee, or any sections of the report, until the Board has taken action. This session should be brief as it is not a time for a dialogue about the committee's judgments.

Administrative Procedures and Policies

Required Time Commitment

The amount and the pace of work during an evaluation require committee members to give their full attention to the activities of the evaluation, throughout its duration. For comprehensive evaluations, committee members should plan for four full days away from their offices and homes to permit participation in the entire evaluation. Any late arrival or early departure impedes the committee's work.

Expense Reimbursement

The Commission provides an expense form for use by committee members, which should be submitted to the Commission office for reimbursement following the evaluation. Evaluators are reimbursed for travel expenses, coach air or rail fare, shuttle or taxi charges, and any hotel and meal expenses that are not direct-billed to the host school. Committee members who choose to drive their own vehicles will be reimbursed for mileage (and any parking fees or tolls) at the current ATS approved rate (with the total reimbursement not to exceed the cost of a 21-day, advance-purchase, coach airline ticket to the same destination). The Commission will also provide a group travel life insurance policy of \$100,000 for each evaluator. Schools will arrange for direct billing of hotel costs during the evaluation, including any meals eaten by committee members at the hotel. The chair of the committee or accrediting staff member participating in the evaluation will take care of group meal expenses for the committee, which typically include the two dinners at the end of the first and second full days. Commission committee members serve without remuneration, whether for a Commission or for a joint, coordinated, or concurrent evaluation with a regional agency.

Evaluator Evaluation

Chairs of accreditation evaluation committees are requested to complete a brief evaluation of each committee member. In addition, the chief administrative officer of the school is asked to complete an evaluation of the school's overall experience with the accreditation process, including the work of the evaluation committee, the accrediting staff, and the Board. These evaluations are used to revise Commission accrediting practices and procedures in order to improve the entire process.

Conclusion

Without the competence and significant contribution of time provided by evaluation committee members, the accreditation process would be impossible. The service provided by evaluation committee members is invaluable to the improvement of theological education in the United States and Canada. In return for this investment of time and professional expertise, the Commission intends, and it has been the experience of most committee members, that these evaluation visits will provide a unique professional development experience that will ultimately enhance the evaluators' own educational skills and the programs of their own institutions.

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER FIVE

*Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards
in Institutional Evaluation*



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

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Introduction

The Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”) provide a basis for evaluating theological schools accredited by the Commission on Accrediting of ATS (“Commission”). The primary purpose of this chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* is to help both self-study committee members and accreditation evaluation committee members to think about the use of the Standards in accreditation review. To engage this reflection, the first section discusses how characteristics of the Standards influence their use in institutional evaluation, the second section explores how the general model of evaluation in the Standards informs the self-study and accreditation peer processes, and the third section lists questions for each area of the Standards that schools can ask in the context of their self-studies and evaluation committee members can ask in the context of their evaluation.

The structure of the Standards is three-tiered, each tier providing support for the next level. The foundational tier consists of the *General Institutional Standards*, the middle tier is the *Educational Standard*, and the final tier holds the *Degree Program Standards*.

The *General Institutional Standards* (Standards 1 through 8) focus on issues that are true for all theological schools regardless of the educational programs they offer: purpose, planning, and evaluation; institutional integrity; theological scholarship (learning, teaching, and research); library and information resources; faculty; student recruitment, admissions, services, borrowing, and placement; authority and governance; and institutional resources. These Standards articulate the expectation that schools will apply the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards* on the foundation of a sound institutional context. The

General Institutional Standards address concerns that affect all theological schools regardless of the kind of educational programs they offer. The structure of the *General Institutional Standards* provides an institutional framework (purpose, planning, and evaluation; institutional integrity; governance; and institutional resources [Standards 1, 2, 7, and 8]) that surrounds the primary activities of a theological school (theological scholarship; library; faculty, and students [Standards 3, 4, 5, and 6]).

The *Educational Standard* (ES) identifies general educational qualities that support the expectations of particular degree programs. This underlayment includes setting forth the four types and the nomenclature of degree programs, the educational context (campus-based, extension, and distance education and individual instruction), the assessment of student learning outcomes, and nondegree programs.

The *Degree Program Standards* (A through J) are divided into four categories: basic programs oriented toward ministerial leadership, basic programs oriented toward general theological studies, advanced programs oriented toward ministerial leadership, and advanced programs primarily oriented toward theological research and teaching. For each degree, the Standards address (1) purpose, goals, learning outcomes, and educational assessment; (2) program content; (3) educational resources and learning strategies; and (4) admissions.

The interpretation of a specific Degree Program Standard depends on the *Educational Standard* in addition to the particular Degree Program Standard, and the interpretation of both depends on the *General Institutional Standards*.

Characteristics of the Standards That Influence Evaluation

Accrediting standards, across different accrediting agencies, are not very standard. They have different textual forms, reflect different understandings of the function of accreditation, and lead to different patterns of evaluation. Understanding the characteristics of the ATS Commission Standards will support their appropriate use in institutional evaluation.

Evaluation and the Types of Textual Material in the Standards

The Standards contain three different types of textual material, and each has different evaluative uses. The Standards contain (1) descriptions of quality in theological education, (2) statements about normative expectations of accredited schools, and (3) mandatory requirements to ensure compliance with ethical or regulatory expectations.

Descriptions of Quality. The underlying, central feature of the Standards is their definition of institutional and educational quality, as it is understood at a particular time, in the context of particular forces in North American religious life, and in light of the broader community of higher education. A significant portion of the text of the Standards describes *characteristics of theological education to which institutions should aspire*.

Most of Standard 3, for example, is devoted to a description of quality in “theological scholarship,” as understood by the community of theological schools comprising the Commission on Accrediting of ATS. The Standard describes theological scholarship in terms of the goals of the theological curriculum and of the activities of learning, teaching, and research, and it discusses, at some length, the characteristics of theological scholarship. This type of text is a “standard” because it defines quality for a central component of theological education. Few self-study committees will be able to read Standard 3 and conclude that scholarship at their school reflects all the characteristics described in the Standard. They will more likely conclude that it does not, but that if it did, theological scholarship at their school would be better.

The accrediting evaluation task, in the context of this kind of material in a Standard, is for the school to determine which of the qualities

in the Standard are most evident in the school and which are inadequately present or absent altogether. Following this determination, the school has the task of developing strategies to cultivate characteristics of quality that are not evident and strategies to ensure the continued presence of characteristics that do exist.

Commission accreditation is not based on a school's demonstration that it exhibits all the characteristics of quality described by the Standards, but it is based, in part, on the school's reasonable and disciplined efforts to develop the characteristics most in need of cultivation, while maintaining the strengths it already exhibits. The Standards hold up many ideals, and accreditation does not assume that every school will exhibit all these ideals. It does assume that schools are committed to improvement and that the qualities in the Standards, however ideal, identify appropriate goals for these efforts at improvement.

Normative Expectations. The Standards also contain *normative expectations for accredited graduate, professional theological schools*. These characteristics should be present in a school accredited by the Commission, and their absence poses an accrediting concern. These normative expectations are often embedded in the longer descriptions of quality because they are best understood in the context of the Standards' definition of quality.

For example, the description of characteristics of quality in theological scholarship (Standard 3) contains some normative expectations about theological scholarship. According to the Standards, "Freedom of Inquiry" (3.3.2) is not just an ideal to which the school should aspire but rather a fundamental requirement: "Schools shall uphold the freedom of inquiry necessary for genuine and faithful scholarship, articulate their understanding of that freedom, formally adopt policies to implement that understanding and ensure procedural fairness, and carefully adhere to those policies." This statement is a normative expectation; freedom of inquiry as understood by a school should be present in an accredited school, and its absence raises accreditation concerns.

All normative expectations in the Standards include the word *shall*. These normative expectations embrace a wide range of institutional behavior (for example, in the statement on freedom of inquiry,

institutions shall “uphold freedom of inquiry,” “articulate their understanding,” “formally adopt policies,” and “carefully adhere”). The evaluation task—both for the school in self-study and for the accreditation evaluation committee—is to investigate the range of policies, understandings, and implementation of the normative expectations in the school. Normative expectations constitute the type of text most often associated with accrediting standards. They are a “standard” because they identify characteristics required of accredited schools. A school is accredited by the Commission not only because it seeks appropriate patterns of improvement (the description of characteristics of quality noted above) but also because it meets basic requirements that have been judged by the community of theological schools to be necessary for graduate, professional theological education.

Mandatory Requirements. A third type of textual material in the Standards consists of *mandatory requirements that reflect regulatory or ethical expectations*. These mandatory requirements typically occur as stand-alone statements in the text of the Standards and reflect either regulatory requirements of authorities outside the member schools, such as governmental agencies, or normative ethical guidelines that are true for any organization related to the Christian or Jewish traditions, like being honest and treating persons fairly.

Unlike the normative expectations described above, mandatory requirements usually require a single, discrete institutional behavior or policy. For example, “The school shall ensure that all published materials . . . accurately represent the institution . . . Wherever appropriate, published institutional documents shall employ gender-inclusive language with reference to persons” (2.3). Either published materials are accurate, in terms of the expectations of this mandatory requirement, or they are not. If they are not, they can easily be put right. In the case of “Institutions shall publish all requirements for degree programs . . .” (6.3.6), the requirements for degree programs are either published accurately or not, and if they are not, they can easily be corrected. This type of text leads to a simple evaluative task: determining whether the school does or does not comply with the requirement.

The Standards have relatively few of these mandatory requirements. In self-studies, schools should audit their institutional policies and behaviors to affirm their compliance. In accreditation evaluations, committees should confirm the school’s compliance. The

mandatory compliance statements are: 1.2.2.2; 2.2; 2.3; 2.7; 2.9; 6.3.1; 6.3.4; 6.3.5; 6.3.6; 6.3.8; 6.4.1; and ES.6.4.4. In addition, the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures* contain three provisions with equal force (VI.G.5, VII.A.4, and X.A.2).

Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards

The Standards organize these various types of text in two ways. The first, and most obvious, is by the patterns of educational and institutional life: the purpose of the school, its central activities (conducting educational programs involving teaching, learning, and research), the resources necessary to accomplish educational and institutional purposes (faculty, governance, library, financial, and other resources), and the characteristics of the degree programs it offers. The second, and less obvious organizational pattern, is by major, recurring themes woven throughout the Standards, including

- a priority on planning and evaluation,
- the value of inclusion across racial/ethnic and gender lines,
- the importance of freedom of inquiry for teaching and learning,
- the globalization of theological education, and
- technology.

These recurring themes could have been included in the Standards as discrete sections, but various deliberations about quality in theological education led to the conclusion that these characteristics are best understood as themes that find expression in a wide range of institutional and educational efforts. Each of these five themes is introduced at one point (evaluation, 1.2.2 and 1.2.3; racial/ethnic inclusion, 2.5, and gender inclusion, 2.6; freedom of inquiry, 3.2.2; globalization, 3.3.4; and technology, 8.8) and subsequently addressed in many other sections. For example, globalization is introduced and defined in Standard 3, “The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research: Theological Scholarship” (3.3.4), and it occurs in Standard 4, “Library and Information Resources” (4.1.2) and in Degree Program Standards, such as the Master of Divinity (A.2.3.2).

While the recurring references to these themes provide the most effective means for understanding their importance to the purposes

and practices of theological education, they pose some problems for the accreditation evaluation task. The themes make the Standards, by one way of reading them, seem repetitive, and the evaluation that follows the Standards one by one, redundant. The Standards require a reading that avoids this problem and a pattern of evaluation that simplifies a complex task, rather than further complicating it.

The most efficient way to conduct the evaluation with regard to these recurring themes is to assign responsibility for the evaluation of a theme to the self-study subcommittee that is responsible for the Standard in which the theme is introduced and described. For example, the self-study subcommittee responsible for reviewing the theological school in the context of Standard 2, “Institutional Integrity,” should evaluate the school’s overall efforts to “enhance participation and leadership of persons of color in theological education . . . (and) promote the participation and leadership of women in theological education within the framework of [its] stated purposes and theological commitments” (2.5 and 2.6). The subcommittee should be sensitive to the recurring nature of the theme (e.g., 4.5.2, 5.1.3, 6.2.4, 7.3.1.3, and 7.3.2.3) and consult with the subcommittees evaluating the school in terms of Standards 4, 5, 6, and 7. This pattern of review is not the only pattern, and schools may address these themes in a manner appropriate to the school, the force of the Standard, and the design of the self-study.

The primary guidance of the Board of Commissioners is that multiple self-study subcommittees should not treat the theme as if it were their primary responsibility. Each subcommittee may have a contribution to make to the evaluation, but only one should coordinate the comprehensive evaluation.

Evaluation and the Format of the Standards

The format of the Standards also influences evaluation. The Standards are organized tightly, and each concept that contributes to the meaning of a broader topic is numbered. Each numbered concept, however, is not a Standard; in fact, none of them is. A *standard* is the set of concepts related to a major topic of importance for graduate, professional theological education. “Library and Information Resources” is a Standard that is defined and described by the summary introduction followed by 21 statements organized under five headings.

The accreditation evaluation of a school's library and information resources is based on the Standard as a whole, not each of the concepts that constitute it.

Self-studies and accreditation committee reviews should not conduct a statement-by-statement review; they should be guided by the thrust of the Standard as a whole. A school is considered to meet a Standard adequately if it meets it generally and meets the specific expectations of statements that include "shall." Specific expectations not met provide the basis for improvement. If a school does not embody the expectations of the Standard in general, even though it may meet some particular expectations, the school is not considered to have met the Standard adequately. In the final analysis, an accrediting decision based on the Standards is a qualitative, professional judgment about a school and its educational programs. It is not a decision that merely reflects the compliance with numerous particular expectations.

Using the General Model of Evaluation in the Accreditation Review Process

Beginning in the decade before the turn of the century, Commission accreditation has reflected a growing focus on evaluation. In the adoption of the redeveloped Standards and revised *Procedures* in 1996, evaluation became a central feature of Commission accreditation, and it is one of the themes that occurs repeatedly throughout the Standards of Accreditation. It first appears in Standard 1, “Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation” (1.2.2 and 1.2.3), which describes the evaluation process in terms of four tasks. The four tasks of this general model are instructive for the accreditation evaluation process.

Tasks of the General Model of Evaluation

The first task of evaluation focuses on the goals of a theological school and asks two important questions. The first question is normative: *Are these the goals an accredited school should have for its various areas of work, in terms of the agreed-upon commitments of the community of theological schools expressed by the Standards?* The Standards of Accreditation define many goals for accredited theological schools. For example, Standards regarding theological scholarship, faculty, library, student services, institutional resources, extension education, distance education, and degree programs contain references to goals expected to be pursued by accredited schools. While the Standards give autonomous institutions wide latitude in the identification and implementation of particular goals, the Standards are normative, and institutional goals should be evaluated in light of the expectations expressed by the Standards. The second question is contextual: *Are these goals the right ones for this institution, at a particular point in its history, in the context of the issues confronting the particular religious communities it serves, and in light of the institution’s broader mission and purpose?* Periodically, good schools ask, for example, if their goals for degree programs are the ones most important for religious leadership, in a particular tradition, at a particular time. Accreditation evaluation committees need to review the school’s own analysis of its institutional and educational goals.

Once goals are properly established, the second task of the evaluation process is identifying the kind of qualitative or quantitative information that will be needed to assess the attainment of those goals. If a school has a system of information-gathering in place, the self-study

should review comprehensively the information that has been collected to determine (1) if the right kind of information is being collected, (2) if the information is being collected in usable forms, and (3) if the school is using the information effectively in the evaluation process. For many schools that have not developed an overall process of information-gathering, the self-study will need to begin by auditing the information that is available to determine what data will inform the self-study evaluation. In addition, the self-study should lead to recommendations about (1) the kinds of information that should be collected and (2) the institutional system necessary to collect the information over time. In the effort to identify appropriate forms of information-gathering, schools should not give priority to quantitative forms of information over qualitative ones. Numerical information is not necessarily more helpful or valuable than qualitative forms of information in determining the extent to which goals have been attained. Numerical information may be preferable for the evaluation of some goals (i.e., efforts to keep student debt at reasonable levels) and qualitative information for other goals (i.e., the extent to which the MDiv program has contributed to students' growth in theological understanding and moral sensitivity). "Good" information is the kind of information that provides an appropriate resource for the thoughtful evaluation of the goal to which it is related. Accreditation evaluation committees have the responsibility to determine whether or not a school has sufficient and appropriate information to support its self-study conclusions and recommendations and to provide a basis for determining the attainment of goals in the future.

The third task in the overall evaluation model is assessment, the task of analyzing and interpreting the information that has been collected. The term *assessment* refers to the activities involved in determining what the information or data mean and asks the question, *To what extent, and in what ways, have the goals been attained?* Information alone, no matter how rich or sophisticated, cannot answer this question. The important goals in theological education are complex and require human judgment and reflection, based on reasonable patterns of information. In many ways, assessment should be the primary activity of the self-study. *Self-study subcommittees should use much of their time assessing the ways in which, and the extent to which, the institution is achieving its goals. Accreditation evaluation committees have the responsibility of confirming or not confirming the assessment made by the*

school in its self-study. One of the committee's primary evaluative functions is assessment: reviewing the conclusions the school has reached about itself on the basis of the goals the school has identified and the information gathered related to these goals. Does the external peer review of the accreditation committee lead to the same conclusions as the school's self-evaluation?

The final phase of the evaluation process involves making decisions about the goals and the activities that have been devised to achieve the goals. This is the process of translating the results of the assessment phase into appropriate plans of institutional action. In the context of the self-study, this task typically takes the form of recommendations regarding refining or establishing goals or designing or revising institutional or educational programs. Effective schools can identify appropriate actions or revised goals and, over time, demonstrate the capacity to implement them. Accreditation evaluation committees have the responsibility to review the capability of schools to implement the plans they have made in the past and, based on institutional information and ability, to implement the recommendations proposed in the self-study.

Cautions about the Use of the General Model of Evaluation

The general model of evaluation in the Standards describes an ongoing institutional activity that accredited schools must implement. The model, however, must be used thoughtfully and, in many ways, cautiously—both by schools and by accreditation committees.

First, this model is orderly and linear, and life in theological schools (described as “communities of faith and learning” in the Standards) is not always orderly and more likely nonlinear than linear. A compulsive and unreflective use of this model could turn the work of theological schools into technology-driven, cause-and-effect performance that would probably not serve well the theological vision or the most profound goals of a theological school.

Second, the general model of evaluation places a premium on goals and on the information that is needed to determine the extent to which the goals have been attained. One temptation in goal-oriented systems is to set goals at readily attainable levels instead of the levels truly required by the institution's purpose or to set goals for which

information can be easily obtained. The necessity of information for the evaluation process should not dictate the character of the goals.

Third, a good evaluation system should have some open space in it because some important institutional or educational effects may occur without intentional planning. The evaluative model, while it focuses on goal attainment, should be able to account for unanticipated positive outcomes of institutional and educational life.

With due caution, schools accredited by the ATS Commission need to implement comprehensive, continuous evaluative efforts, even though it is difficult work. The primary task of a theological school is theological scholarship (understood in the Standards as learning, teaching, and research), and the school cannot spend more energy on evaluation than on its primary task. However, evaluation is the only way the school will know if and how it is accomplishing its primary task, and evaluation is sufficiently important that it merits institutional energy and resources. Evaluation, in a school that understands its primary task theologically, is an aspect of stewardship. Evaluation helps a school to understand if it is accomplishing its important tasks: *Have students learned what needs to be learned? Has the teaching contributed to the formation and knowledge of religious leaders? Is the school using its scarce resources in the ways that most effectively help it accomplish its purpose?*

Questions to Prompt the Accreditation Evaluation Process

The accreditation process depends on thoughtful people who bring intellectual ability to the task of evaluating a school—both in the self-study and in the peer accreditation evaluation. The questions that follow are meant to prompt thought about the Standards of Accreditation, not to function as a protocol of questions for peer evaluators to ask or answers for schools to develop in the self-study. They provide an interrogative commentary on the Standards and a starting point for the evaluative efforts of the overall accreditation process. There is a simple, three part litany that underlies many of these questions: *What is the evaluative process? Is it effective? How is the school using the results?*

1 Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation

1.1 Purpose

- How does the purpose of this school relate to the understanding of purpose in the Standards of Accreditation?
- Is the purpose articulated in ways that define the school's confessional commitments and the implications of those commitments for the school's institutional and educational life?
- How does a theological school related to a college or university support the purpose of the larger institution of which it is a part?
- How does the school's understanding of its purpose distinguish it from other theological schools?
- What process has been used to arrive at the formal statement of purpose, and what constituencies contributed to its formation? How is it evaluated (i.e., How does the school know if its purpose is being accomplished?)
- How has the school's understanding of its purpose influenced recent decisions about institutional change or innovation?

1.2 Planning and Evaluation

- Subsections 1.2.2 and 1.2.3 anchor the first recurring theme (a priority on planning and assessment). See "Evaluation and Recurring

Themes in the Standards” above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of recurring themes.

- Subsection 1.2.2.2 is a mandatory requirement. See “Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards” above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of mandatory requirements.
- How does the school’s purpose influence the allocation of institutional resources? Does the current use of resources reflect the priorities and commitments embodied in the institutional purpose?
- What is the school’s overall system of comprehensive evaluation? Does it include evaluation of employees, students, and members of the governing board? Does it also provide for the systematic evaluation of educational programs and institutional efforts?
- What evidence exists that the school has made changes in educational programs or institutional initiatives on the basis of the results of its evaluation efforts?

2 Institutional Integrity

- Subsections 2.2, 2.3, 2.7, and 2.9 are mandatory requirements. See “Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards” above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of mandatory requirements. In addition, there is a mandatory expectation in the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures* (VII.A.4) related to advertising of the comprehensive evaluation. This expectation should be treated in the same fashion as a mandatory requirement.
- Subsections 2.5 and 2.6 anchor the second recurring theme (the value of inclusion across racial/ethnic and gender lines). See “Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards” above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of recurring themes.
- What efforts have been undertaken by this school to enhance participation of racial/ethnic minority persons in this school? How does the proportion of racial/ethnic minority representatives in the school compare with the population of racial/ethnic persons in the constituency served by the school?

- How is the school helping racial/ethnic majority students gain the knowledge and skills necessary to provide religious leadership in an increasingly racially and culturally diverse world?
- What is the confessional commitment of the school toward women in religious leadership roles, and what do these commitments mean for the faculty and student body?

3 Learning, Teaching, and Research: Theological Scholarship

- Subsections 3.2.2 and 3.3.4 anchor the third and fourth recurring themes (the importance of freedom of inquiry for teaching and learning and the globalization of theological education). Please see “Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards” above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of recurring themes.

3.1 and 3.2 Goals of the Theological Curriculum and Activities of Theological Scholarship

- How does the school demonstrate the importance it places on student learning?
- What practices does the school promote to encourage learning that fosters understanding of self and religious tradition?
- What evidence exists that students benefit from a variety of teaching methods and instructional attention to different learning styles?
- How does the school encourage and develop the teaching skills of its instructional staff?
- How does course development reflect patterns of faculty collaboration and interaction?
- How does the school know that individual courses contribute to the broader learning goals of the degree programs?
- Is there evidence that courses reflect new developments in society, in religious communities, and in disciplinary fields of study?

- How does the institution understand the kind of research its faculty members should undertake, and how does it support the research of the faculty?
- How do faculty members encourage students to develop research skills appropriate for their programs of study and future leadership?
- What is the quality of learning, teaching, and research at this school? What perceptions of quality form the basis of this assessment?

3.3 Characteristics of Theological Scholarship

- How do the activities of teaching, learning, and research in this school reflect collaborative efforts among faculty members, students, or others?
- How does this school understand the faculty's freedom of inquiry? In the context of this understanding, how is freedom of inquiry articulated in faculty/staff handbooks, in policies of the governing board, and in procedures for promotion and tenure?
- What evidence exists that the school carefully follows its policies? Is there any evidence that faculty members or students are denied the freedom of inquiry that is necessary for theological scholarship?
- What are the grounds for dismissal of faculty members from tenure or contract? Is there any evidence in the school's recent history as an employer that other grounds were used than the ones formally stated in policies?
- What publics does the school most want the scholarship of its faculty members or staff to reach? What support or encouragement does the school provide for reaching these various publics?
- How do teaching and learning at this school contribute to global awareness and concern? How are cross-cultural understandings cultivated by the courses or other educational events? How do course requirements, library collections, and faculty research give evidence of the school's commitments to globalization as it understands this value in theological education?

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- How does this school encourage or provide support for students to engage in transcultural learning?
- How does this school ensure the ethical character of its educational activities?
- How does this school understand the broader concept of globalization, and what activities of the school provide support for meaningful attention to this issue, as understood by the school?

4 Library and Information Resources

4.1 Library Collections

- What is the school's collection development policy? On what basis has it been developed; how recently was it reviewed and updated; and what evidence exists that collection development is following the policy?
- How does the library balance print collections and access to electronic databases? What constituencies participate in the process of answering this question? What educational policies support this allocation?
- Does the library coordinate its collection development with other theological schools? What contributions does the school's library make to the collection needs of those other schools?
- What is the overall quality of the library's collection in view of the educational programs offered by the school and the research of its students and faculty members? How does the library come to this qualitative conclusion?
- What evidence does the library have that its resources are well and effectively used and that they are meeting the needs of students and faculty members?

4.2 and 4.3 Contribution to Teaching, Learning, and Research and to Curriculum Development

- What evidence does the school provide that the library actively supports the research interests of faculty members and students?
- How are professional library staff members involved in the school's process of curriculum development?

4.4 Administration and Leadership

- How does the chief administrator of the library participate in institutional planning, faculty decision making, and the institutional budgeting process? How do these patterns of participation contribute to the library's support for theological scholarship?
- How does the chief administrator of the library provide leadership for evaluation of the personnel who work in the library, the quality of the collection, and the educational contribution of library and information resources?

4.5 Resources

- How does the school determine the appropriate level of resources for the library, and what evidence exists that these resources are being provided by the institution at a level sufficient for the library to meet the educational needs of the school?
- How does the school determine the portion of its educational and general budget that should be devoted to library support, and what evidence exists that the school is regularly spending funds that have been budgeted for the library?
- In what ways are library facilities and space adequate and appropriate for the educational and research purposes of the library?

5 Faculty

5.1 Faculty Qualifications, Responsibilities, Development, and Employment

- What are the credentials of the faculty, and how does the school understand these credentials as appropriate for graduate, professional theological education?
- How does this institution understand and practice freedom of inquiry for faculty members? In what ways is this freedom ensured by institutional policy and practice?
- Are faculty members adequate in number to cover the range of disciplines included in the degree programs offered by the school? What are the areas of faculty strength and weakness, in terms of the composition of the faculty?

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- In what ways can the faculty be considered diverse, and how does this diversity support or impede the educational programs of the school?
- How does the faculty exercise its responsibility for the academic oversight of the programs of study? What evidence demonstrates that the faculty exercises this role effectively?
- What are the policies of this school regarding faculty rights and responsibilities and other conditions of academic employment? How is the effectiveness of these policies evaluated, and by whom?
- What procedures does this school have to retain qualified faculty members and to provide them the support necessary for long-term scholarly contribution? Are these procedures effective? Who, and on what basis, makes this determination?
- How do the workload expectations of faculty members balance time needed for students, for teaching and administration, for scholarly pursuits, and for contributions to church and community? Because there never seems to be enough time for all these pursuits in a theological school, have adequate and appropriate compromises been made? How does the institution guide or support faculty members in terms of balancing the various demands on faculty time?

5.2 Faculty Role in Teaching

- Do members of the faculty, administration, and student body perceive that faculty members have the freedom in the classroom necessary to discuss the subjects in which they have competence?
- In what ways does the school support the development of faculty members as teachers? What support does the school provide to encourage good teaching?
- What mechanisms does the school maintain to evaluate teaching effectiveness of faculty members, and are these mechanisms helpful?

5.3 Faculty Role in Student Learning

- How do faculty members participate in evaluation of student learning, and how does this pattern of evaluation contribute to the educational goals of the school?
- How do the routine practices of individual faculty members, as well as the entire faculty's oversight of the degree programs, contribute to students' capacity to think theologically, to integrate diverse learning objectives, and to accomplish the educational goals of the program of study?

5.4 Faculty Role in Theological Research

- What does the school expect of faculty members in terms of research? What support does the institution provide to help faculty members meet its expectations? Is this faculty engaged in research, and what is the quality of that research? By what standard does the school judge the quality of research?
- How do faculty members make available the results of their research?

6 Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, Borrowing, and Placement

- Subsections 6.1.2, 6.3.1, 6.3.4, 6.3.5, 6.3.6, and 6.3.8 are mandatory requirements. See "Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards" above in this *Handbook* chapter for a discussion of the function and treatment of mandatory requirements.

6.1 Recruitment

- How does the school understand that its policies and practices of student recruitment reflect the purposes of the institution?
- How accurately and realistically do recruitment materials and processes convey the vocational possibilities related to degree programs for which students are being recruited?

6.2 Admission

- In what ways do criteria for admission support the cultivation of quality in religious leadership? What processes are employed to review the quality of candidates, and what strategies have been employed to enhance finding applicants of high quality?
- How do admission criteria vary according to the expectations of each of the degree programs offered, and are the resulting variations appropriate to the vocational and academic expectations of each degree?
- What admission efforts support commitments of the school to encourage diversity of the student body in areas such as race, ethnicity, region, denomination, gender, or disability?
- How do admission efforts and processes encourage an appropriate baccalaureate education?

6.3 Student Services

- What is the school's ongoing method of evaluation of student services, what has the evaluation revealed, and what actions have been taken in light of the evaluative conclusions reached?
- How does the school provide commensurate services to students wherever they are enrolled?
- How does the school's maintenance of student records ensure appropriate levels of confidentiality and privacy for students, appropriate access for school personnel, and security from physical or electronic destruction?
- How does the school demonstrate that its tuition and fees are appropriate for the degrees earned, in the context of income students can likely anticipate from the forms of religious service for which they are preparing?
- What process is in place to respond to complaints from students regarding issues related to Standards of Accreditation, including records of the complaints and the institutional responses to them?

6.4 Student Borrowing

- How does the school monitor student indebtedness and what institutional efforts are in place to counsel students, monitor over-borrowing, and cultivate financial responsibility among students?

6.5 Placement

- How does the school monitor the completion rate of students and their rate of placement in positions related to the degree programs they are completing? How has this monitoring influenced policies or decisions regarding admissions?
- How does the school advocate on behalf of graduates who are members of groups that have been disadvantaged in vocational employment because of race, ethnicity, gender, and disability?

7 Authority and Governance

7.1 Authority

- What is the structure and scope of the school's authority? What documents describe this structure, and are they clear and consistent? How appropriately is the authority delegated and how faithfully is the structure of authority implemented in the school's practices? How well does the structure serve the school's purpose and mission?

7.2 Governance

- What is the system of governance in this school? Does it relate appropriately to the school's legal, moral, institutional, or ecclesiastical pattern of authority?
- How does the school understand and implement patterns of sharing the governing process, and how are the unique and overlapping roles and responsibilities of board, faculty, administrators, students, and others defined so that all partners exercise their mandated or delegated leadership?

7.3 Roles

7.3.1 Governing Board

- What evidence supports the expectation that the board maintains the integrity of the institution, including freedom from inappropriate internal or external control?
- How well has the board implemented its role of exercising proper fiduciary responsibility, financial oversight, and proper delegation of authority to administration and faculty and of ensuring procedural fairness and freedom of inquiry?
- How does the board monitor the qualifications of its members, and how do those members, in the context of the institution's purpose, reflect diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender?
- How does the governing board oversee ongoing institutional planning and evaluation and assess the degree to which the institution is achieving its goals and purpose? What indicators does the board use to determine if the purpose of the school is being met or not? How do these indicators relate to the purpose?
- What evidence exists that the governing board understands its role in policy formation and the necessity of delegating much of the implementation of that policy to administration and faculty?
- Is there any evidence that members of the board seek to exercise authority other than in the context of the board as a whole, or its delegated subgroups? If so, how has the board dealt with this problem?
- How does the board know that it is making good decisions on behalf of the school? What indicators does the board use in determining whether or not its decisions have been good?
- How does the board evaluate the performance of board members, and what effect does the evaluation process have on retention of current members or selection of new ones?

7.3.2–7.3.4 Administration, Faculty, Students

- How do administrative leaders seek to implement policies in ways that ensure fairness and embody the theological values the school articulates?
- How do the persons serving as administrative leaders reflect the institution's constituencies, accounting for the desirability of diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender?
- Do administrative leaders have adequate resources and authority to discharge their responsibilities? Is there a difference in formal and informal structures that impairs the ability of administrative leaders to perform their tasks?
- Are the structures of accountability clearly defined and implemented?
- How does the faculty know when it is functioning effectively as a governing body over those functions for which it has been delegated authority?
- How does the faculty contribute to the institution's overall decision-making process?

8 Institutional Resources

8.1 Personnel

- How does the school seek to enhance the quality of the lives of students, faculty members, administrators, staff, and support personnel?
- Are appropriate policies in place regarding procedural fairness, sexual harassment, and discrimination?

8.2 Financial Resources

- Has the school maintained economic equilibrium over the past three or more years? If not, what factors contributed to disequilibrium and what plans are in place to restore equilibrium?

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- Are the sources of income for this school reasonably stable, and are projected revenues sufficient to maintain the educational quality of the school? Is the projected revenue realistic?
- Has this school balanced expenditures and revenue, using a prudent rate of spending from endowment and other assets?
- At what rate is the school consuming the revenue generated by its endowment, and does this rate reflect realistic and prudent assumptions?
- If related to a larger institution, how does the theological school enhance the institution of which it is a part, and how does the larger institution understand the contribution of the theological school?
- Does the school employ accounting and reporting procedures generally used in US or Canadian higher education? Is financial information available to decision-makers in timely and appropriate form?
- Does the institution have an annual external, independent audit, and how has the institution attended to the report of the audit, in terms of both overall financial strength and management issues?
- How does the institution develop and implement its budget? Does this process result in prudent use of funds properly oriented to the school's purpose and mission?
- How does the school's governing board develop and oversee budget allocations and financial policies? Are finances subject to control or constraint by entities other than the governing board?
- Does the school have an appropriate and efficient process for managing the business affairs of the organization?
- How effective is the school's program of institutional advancement in developing financial resources?
- How does the institution ensure that donor wishes are respected in the use of donor-restricted funds?

8.3 Physical Resources

- How adequate are the school's physical resources for the purpose and programs of the school?
- How does the school attend to the safety and security needs of persons who work and study at the institution?
- How does the institution maintain, allocate, and ensure the adequacy of space for its institutional and educational activities?
- How do the physical resources of the school contribute to or detract from accomplishing the school's purpose and mission?

8.4 Institutional Information Technology Resources

- How adequately do the school's data and information resources support the efforts to evaluate institutional and educational effectiveness?
- How adequately does the institution's technology support its information needs?

8.5 Institutional Environment

- How does the overall institutional environment contribute to or detract from the attainment of the school's purpose and mission?

8.6 Cooperative Use of Resources

- If a school uses resources it does not own, how are the agreements for those resources maintained, and what guarantees does the school have that the resources will continue to be available as needed?

8.7 Clusters

- If the school participates in a cluster or consortium of theological schools, how does the cluster contribute to the attainment of the school's purpose and mission, and how does the school contribute to the purpose of the cluster?

- What is the purpose of the cluster, and is the cluster organized in ways appropriate to its purpose? How does the organization of the cluster add to or reduce the work of its constituent members?
- How is the work and effectiveness of the cluster reviewed and evaluated? What evidences of effectiveness are used as the criteria for evaluation?

8.8 Instructional Technology Resources

- How does the institution inform students of the necessary skills and mastery of technology required for full participation in the degree program to which they are seeking admission?
- How are “sufficient technical support services” determined and evaluated?

ES Educational Standard Applicable to All Degree Programs

- Most of the evaluation of the curriculum will be completed in the context of the Standards for each degree program (Standards A through J); however, the statements in the *Educational Standard* address some educational goals that should be evident across degree programs.
- How do the educational programs of this school seek to cultivate theological understanding, as described by the Standard?
- How will this school, in the context of its religious and intellectual traditions, know if students have a deepened spiritual awareness or growing moral sensibility?
- What educational practices does the school have to cultivate learning in which professional and scholarly skills, understanding of theological disciplines, and spiritual growth are intimately interwoven?

ES.1 Degree Programs and Nomenclature

- How does the school distinguish among the educational goals for different degree programs, incorporate these differences in curricular design, and communicate the distinctiveness of degree

programs to students? When the same courses are used for more than one degree program, how are their requirements adapted to meet the educational goals of the program toward which the course is being credited?

- How does the school determine that a sufficient community of peers exists for each of the degree programs it offers?
- Do the degree programs offered by the school follow the recommended nomenclature? If not, does the school have compelling reasons for the variation, and has the Board of Commissioners granted permission for the variation in nomenclature?
- How do the degree programs offered by the school clearly articulate their educational purposes in terms of the four broad categories of degree programs approved by the Commission?

ES.1.2 Basic Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership

ES.1.3 Basic Programs Oriented Toward General Theological Studies

ES.1.4 Advanced Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership

ES.1.5 Advanced Programs Primarily Oriented Toward Theological Research and Teaching

ES.1.6 Degree Program Standards

- Each degree offered by the school should be evaluated by the appropriate Degree Program Standard (A through J).
- Is the purpose of each degree program distinctive and coherent with the purpose of the Standard in which it is situated?
- Are the educational goals of each degree program appropriate, in the context of the relevant Standard (content), the mission of the institution, and the educational needs of the students?
- How are the educational goals of each degree program related to the leadership needs of the religious communities in which graduates will serve in ministry?

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- Are the learning outcomes for each degree program distinctive and clearly articulated?
- In what ways, and to what extent, are the educational goals of each degree program being met, as demonstrated by the outcomes assessment program of the institution?
- Does the curriculum of each degree program provide adequate exposure to the content areas set out for the program of study?
- Do the program requirements meet the Standards for duration and location?
- How adequate are the school's resources for each of the degree programs it offers, and in what ways, if any, do the resources needed for one program contribute to or detract from the resources needed by other programs?
- Are students who are admitted to each degree program properly qualified for the program for which admission was offered?
- This subsection contains a provision (1.6.1) for modified degree program requirements under certain conditions. If the institution is offering any degree programs with such modifications, what do its evaluative processes show with respect to achievement of the program's learning outcomes?

ES.2 Campus-based Education

- Does the institution provide the variety of resources in a common location required to support a community of learning as described by the Standards?

ES.2.1 Residency

- Does the institution provide the full array of services and resources to support in-person interactions, for example, with instructors, field education supervisors, and spiritual directors?

ES.3 Extension Education

- The issues identified in each of the eight *General Institutional Standards* are all present, though from a different perspective, in extension education activities. This subsection seeks to focus the

General Institutional Standards with respect to the distinctive concerns of extension education.

- In what ways does the institution demonstrate that it has developed its programs of extension education in ways that are congruent with the institution's mission and purpose, appropriate to the students and context being served, and adequate to fulfill the purposes of the degree programs?
- How has the institution addressed the purposes of its extension site programs in its overall strategic planning and evaluation procedures? What evidence is there that the institution has used the results of its evaluation to modify its extension programs?
- How does the institution establish, approve, and review the programs of study and course curricula for extension education programs in ways that are consistent with its formal institutional policies and procedures?
- How does the institution ensure that library and information resources are appropriate and sufficient for the purposes of the extension program(s) and the needs of students at extension sites? If library resources and facilities of other institutions are used to meet the needs of extension education programs, how does the school demonstrate that those libraries offer the functional availability and adequacy of appropriate resources?
- Do the full-time faculty members share sufficient responsibility for teaching and academic oversight of extension education to ensure that the institution's goals and ethos are evident wherever the institution conducts its work?
- In what ways does the institution ensure that students in extension programs have access to appropriate services, including advisory and administrative support, program and vocational counseling, financial aid, placement, and academic records?
- Has the institution met the licensing regulations of the community in which the program is offered?

ES.4 Distance Education

- The issues identified in each of the eight *General Institutional Standards* are all present, though from a different perspective, in distance education courses and programs. This subsection seeks to focus the *General Institutional Standards* with respect to the distinctive concerns of distance education.
- There is a mandatory expectation in the ATS Commission *Policies and Procedures* (VI.G.5) that the institution will have a process by which it verifies that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit. This expectation should be treated in the same fashion as a mandatory requirement. Does the institution have such a process in place?
- In what ways does the institution demonstrate that it has developed its programs of distance education in ways that are congruent with the institution's mission and purpose, appropriate to the students and context being served, and adequate to fulfill the purposes of the degree programs?
- In what ways, if any, is the institution's terminology inconsistent with the Standard's definition of distance education, (e.g., describing an extension site as "distance education" because it occurs at a distance from the main campus)?
- How has the institution included planning and evaluation processes for its distance education programs in its overall strategic planning and evaluation procedures? What evidence is there that the institution has used the results of its evaluation to modify either its distance education programs or its mission statement or both?
- In what ways does the school demonstrate how programs offered through the mode of distance education seek to meet the Standards of learning, teaching, and research described in Standard 3; the goals of the theological curriculum addressed in this Standard; requirements regarding library and information resources outlined in Standard 4; and the provisions for faculty control, involvement, and development described in Standard 5?
- How has the institution guarded against allowing the accumulation of distance education courses to constitute a significant portion of

a degree program that, as a result, lacks coherence, intentionality, and curricular design?

- How does the institution ensure that distance education programs provide students with appropriate opportunities for collaboration, personal development, interaction with faculty members and among peers within a community of learning, and supervised field or internship opportunities when appropriate to the degree program?
- In what ways does the school provide for faculty development and assistance, thus ensuring consistent, effective, and timely support?
- What procedures are in place to ensure that faculty members possess requisite credentials, demonstrate competence appropriate to the specific purposes of these instructional programs, and benefit from institutional practices regarding scholarly development and support for faculty research?
- How accurately do the school's recruitment efforts and publications represent the technological aspects of the distance education programs, including a description of the hardware and software used and the ability, skill, and access needed for students to participate satisfactorily in the program?
- How does the school integrate the administration of its distance education programs into its regular policies and procedures?

ES.5 Faculty-directed Individual Instruction

- What approval and monitoring procedures does the institution have in place to ensure that such instruction is limited to meeting "unique educational and student needs" and involves "substantive interaction between the student and the faculty member?"

ES.6 Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

- Does the institution's process for assessing student learning outcomes and degree program goals address each of the four components?
- Is there evidence of the alignment of individual course learning outcomes and degree program goals?

- Do the measures of student learning provide both direct and indirect evidence?
- Do the procedures for collecting and assessing data related to student learning guard the confidentiality of student work?
- Do students and members of the faculty and governing board have clearly articulated roles in the process of assessing student learning outcomes?
- How are assessment results linked to curriculum and educational planning, institutional strategic planning, and resource allocation?

ES.7 Academic Guidelines: Admission, Transfer of Credits, Shared Credit in Degree Programs, and Advanced Standing

Each of the four elements in this subsection addresses a potential technical issue with regard to the operation of a school's educational program (exceptions to admissions requirements, transfer of credits, shared credit in degree programs, and advanced standing).

- The school is already required (2.9) to make its policy with respect to transfer of credits public. If it accepts transfer credits, do the consequential policies conform to the requirements of ES.7.2?
- If the other three elements of this subsection affect the school's policies and practices, does the school have effective mechanisms for evaluating each element on a regular basis?

ES.8 Nondegree Instructional Programs

- In what ways do the nondegree programs of teaching and learning offered by the school reflect the purpose of the institution?
- How do nondegree programs reflect the administrative care and educational quality appropriate to a graduate school of theology?
- How does the school distinguish among the types of nondegree programs it offers, and how does it ensure that students know if credit is granted for work; and if credit is granted, how does the school ensure the educational quality of this credit in terms of admissions and academic integrity?

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER SIX

Guidelines for Evaluating Globalization in Commission Schools

NOTE: These ATS Commission guidelines are currently being revised and, when completed, will be posted with other guidelines on the Petitions page of the ATS website under Accrediting. Until then, this document is blank with only the title page remaining as a placeholder. The Petitions web page does include a set of Guidelines on Global Awareness and Engagement adopted by the ATS Board of Directors in December 2013 that schools may use.

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

CHAPTER SEVEN

*A Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment
of Student Learning*



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Preface

The title of this document, “A Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment of Student Learning” is intentional for these reasons:

- As a **reflective** guide, it is more than just a fact-based set of instructions for doing assessment. Rather, it contains practical and personal reflections regarding perceptions and practices of assessment. As such, it is less formal than other sections of the *Handbook*, using, for example, the editorial “we” throughout. The intention of this more personal approach is to make assessment more understandable to a wide range of constituents, including administrators, staff, faculty, and trustees.
- As a reflective **guide**, it suggests one way to do effective assessment but by no means serves as “the guide” or “the only way” to do assessment. The ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”), not this guide, constitute the final word on assessment for member schools. Still, schools that review this guide, based on those Standards, should be well positioned to meet the expectations on assessment of the ATS Board of Commissioners (“Board”). That Board, which approved this guide, is the representative body of peers and public members elected by the Commission membership to make accrediting decisions on behalf of the entire membership.
- Addressing **effective assessment**, this guide does not (and cannot) encapsulate every ideal of assessment. It is based on best practices of assessment recognized by the ATS Board of Commissioners to be effective and is founded on the Commission Standards on assessment that frame and inform those best practices.
- Regarding assessment **of student learning**, this guide focuses almost exclusively on how member schools assess what students learn, rather than on the broader area of institutional evaluation, although the two are clearly related and, on occasion, interrelated, as we discuss in section 3.

Introduction

Assessment. It is a simple educational idea, to reflect thoughtfully on the work of teaching and learning. Yet assessment can also strike fear into the hearts of deans, trigger resentment from faculty, and throw self-study coordinators into confusion and despair. Perhaps that is why assessment is, by far, the most frequent area of needed growth (and concern) surfaced by accreditation committees and by the ATS Board of Commissioners—all composed of your peers. It seems to be an area of struggle across many graduate institutions of theological education—regardless of size, faculty, finances, denominational affiliation, longevity, or any other factor. We believe, however, that assessment can be one of the most rewarding tasks that a school undertakes. This little guide is intended to highlight the high value that assessment can have for your school. Please note that in this guide *assessment* refers primarily to *assessment of student learning*, as opposed to the broader but related arena of institutional evaluation (see section 3).

While we assume that all ATS member institutions have some experience in assessment, we also know that many individuals involved in assessment are often new to their institutions or new to the

This guide provides a concise and practical framework to help institutions imagine, implement, and improve their own assessment program, and it serves member schools by clearly linking the project of assessment to the expectations of the ATS Commission Standards.

role of assessment, given the normal transitions among member schools. These transitions involve those who serve not only as assessment directors or coordinators but also as presidents and deans—and faculty and trustees. We mention the latter two especially because the ATS Commission Standards approved by the membership in 2012 make it clear that “the buck stops” for assessment in two places: with the faculty and with the board. Educational Standard, section ES.6, Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, includes two statements that reinforce this point: (1) “Evaluation of student learning is the responsibility of the faculty” (ES.6.4.1), and (2) “The governing board of the school is

responsible for ensuring that the school has a program of assessment of student learning and that the results of these activities inform and shape educational and institutional decisions” (ES.6.4.3).

This guide attempts to demystify assessment in at least two ways. First, it provides a concise and practical framework to help institutions imagine, implement, and improve their own assessment programs. Second, it serves member schools by clearly linking the project of assessment to the expectations of the ATS Commission Standards.

As we begin, an important caveat is warranted. The ATS Board of Commissioners, peers elected by the entire ATS Commission membership, believes there is *no single best way* to do assessment, but there are *best practices* for effective assessment that are highlighted by the Standards and discussed in this document. This is called “A Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment of Student Learning” because it

is intended as just that. It is a guide to assessment deemed *effective*—in light of the ATS Commission Standards, approved by the membership of approximately 250 Accredited Member or Candidate

We offer this brief guide not to break new ground in assessment but to highlight some best practices (based on the Standards of Accreditation) that we see among member schools—and to warn against some not-so-good practices that we sometimes see.

for Accredited Member schools.

The literature on assessment is extensive, even exhausting. We offer this brief guide to highlight some best practices (based on the Standards) that we see among member schools—and to warn against some not-so-good practices that we sometimes see. This is not

a quick fix for schools that struggle with assessment, but it is meant to be a helpful guide along the assessment path, especially the path that ATS member schools walk as they focus on assessment of student learning within the context of graduate theological education. Like other sections of the *Self-Study Handbook*, this document seeks to be illustrative and suggestive. It is intended to help schools think about how to implement the Commission Standards, specifically those dealing with the assessment of student learning. In the end, every school's assessment efforts will be evaluated in light of the Commission Standards. We believe, however, that this guide will help schools better understand and implement the Standards regarding the assessment of student learning.

Section 1

The Purpose and Importance of Assessment

Assessment and its twin, evaluation, appear nearly 300 times throughout the Standards, beginning with General Institutional Standard 1, culminating in Educational Standard, section ES.6, and emphasized in the first section of all ten Degree Program Standards. Why all this concern about assessment? [For a discussion of the terms *assessment* and *evaluation*, see section 3.]

A key reason why assessment of student learning merits more attention and raises more concerns, by far, than any other issue before the ATS Board of Commissioners is this: assessment helps schools know how they can better achieve their mission. Nothing matters more than mission. That is why virtually every accrediting agency lists mission or purpose first among their Standards, including the ATS Commission Standards. We even heard of one hospital administrator whose title on the door read “Vice President of Mission Achievement.” She was their director of assessment.

Assessment is not about compliance but about a common commitment to continuous improvement in our educational practices and our institutional missions. Assessment is about improvement.

The primary purpose of the ATS Commission on Accrediting is to “contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools that are members” (Commission on Accrediting *Bylaws*, Section 1.2). It is the nearly 250 institutional members of the Commission that have developed and approved the Standards—and their increased focus on assessment. The Standards are intended to “identify qualities associated with good institutional and educational practice” among member schools and to “articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the theological school community” (*Preface to the Standards of Accreditation*). It is crucial to understand at the outset that *assessment is not about compliance but about a common commitment to continuous improvement* in our educational practices and our institutional missions. Assessment is about improvement.

To be sure, one oft-cited reason to care about assessment is that it is required to be accredited. And accreditation—at least in the United States—is the gateway to more than \$150 billion in annual

federal financial aid, without which most US schools could not survive, including many ATS member schools. And in Canada, there is increasing provincial pressure to document quality assurance through assessment of student learning. However, to say that schools should do assessment because accreditation—or worse, the government—requires it is similar to faculty telling students to “learn this because it will be on the test.” If assessment is simply “on the test” (or “is the test”), some schools may fail or barely pass because there is not appropriate motivation to do the work (lack of assessment data) or to do it adequately (weak assessment data; e.g., only perception-based). Some may struggle simply because they do not understand the concept. Recall the Ethiopian official’s response to Philip in Acts 8:31, “How can I understand unless someone should guide me?” Assessment is not important because it will be “on the test” for accreditation. It is important because it helps you ask yourself these three fundamental questions:

- What are you trying to do (in light of your mission)?
- How do you (and others) know how well you are doing it?
- How might you do it more effectively?

Perhaps a more appealing way to think of assessment is this: Assessment is about telling your institution’s story. Or better, how to improve your institution’s story. And the heart of your story is your mission. Solid assessment data help you know and tell your story, especially when you can blend numbers and narratives. Which assertion in each of these pairs of statements conveys a more powerful story?

- Our students make great pastors; or,
Over the last five years 95 percent of our MDiv graduates have been placed in more than 50 different ministries around the world.
- Our students like our school; or,
Our students rate their experiences here in the top tier of all seminaries across North America.
- We’ve got a great faculty; or,
Our students consistently cite our faculty as the number one reason why they came—and why they stay.

Assessment is simply asking yourself what it is that you are trying to do and then thoughtfully considering how well you are doing it and how you might do it better.

Lest we be accused of pandering to mere marketing, we understand that assessment is about improving student learning, not “bragging” about what you do well. However, part of assessment is holding yourself accountable to share assessment information—good and bad—with key constituents in appropriate contexts. Some stories will celebrate your strengths. Other stories may be candid confessions of concerns that need addressing: We are not yet where we want to be, but here is where we are going—to help our students improve and better achieve our mission.

Effective assessment tells your *unique* story, instead of a generic or idealized story, because it asks the questions *you* care about, based on criteria that are defined by *you* and that matter to *you*. Good assessment draws on what *you* already know and what *you* value. It is about beginning where you are, not reinventing the wheel or fitting into someone else’s box. Assessment is certainly not about bowing to bureaucracy or being deluged by “administrivia” (as one dean once described it). Assessment is part of the natural curiosity of educators and institutions. It is simply asking yourself what it is that you are trying to do and then thoughtfully considering how well you are doing it and how you might do it better.

The focus of assessment, then, is about improvement and accountability—to yourself, your school, your students, and your constituents—not simply to an external entity. It really is a matter of institutional integrity: are you doing what your mission claims? *Assessment demonstrates to your stakeholders—including students and staff, donors and denominations—how well your school is living out its mission.* Assessment also helps institutions address the critical issues of where to focus limited resources, where to expand programming or personnel, and how to plan for the future.

Section 2 Some Limits and Challenges to Assessment

As important as assessment is, it is only fair to discuss its limits and its challenges. The first limit we would list is that assessment is not a panacea for solving all of a school's problems. We believe it is a very important part of what a school does, but it is not everything that a school should do nor even the most important thing. Some ATS member schools, for example, must focus so much energy on addressing their financial problems that assessment of student learning cannot be their main priority. As one accreditor on an evaluation visit to a troubled school commented, "You can't focus on the effectiveness of your furnace when your house is on fire." And yet, even here we would note that assessment is a key factor in addressing financial issues effectively, as it provides data that can help an institution determine which expenses might be cut, which programs to expand, and which budget priorities to address. Put another way, assessment itself can't put out the fire, but it can sometimes help a school identify which fire-suppression strategies to attempt.

Assessment is a terrific servant but a terrible master.

Related to this, we often hear from schools that one of the key challenges in assessment is that it can become an all-consuming, even overwhelming task. While it is a key emphasis in the ATS Commission Standards, it is not the only focus. To be sure, assessment is important, but it is meant to be a means to a greater end, not an end in itself. Faculty cannot spend so much time on *assessing* what students learn that those energies diminish *what* students learn. One colleague with rural roots put it so succinctly: "You can't fatten a hog by weighing it." Assessment is a terrific servant but a terrible master.

Another limit to assessment is often echoed in this familiar statement: *Not everything that is valued can be measured, and not everything that is measured should be valued.* While assessment typically requires some means of measurement (usually stated in terms of both multiple measurements and multiple measurers), the ATS Commission Standards revised in 2012 focus more on "demonstrability" than "measurement." Assessment cannot be reduced to or limited by some mechanistic, formulaic set of numbers. Measurement that evokes an image of a

Grades can certainly be a part of a school's assessment efforts, but accreditors and the public—your peers and your constituents—long ago stopped viewing course grades as sufficient to tell the whole story of what students are learning.

fixed yardstick or simple scale is invariably inadequate to assess the complex concepts foundational to theological education. Many of the most important things that ATS member schools care about seem to defy measurement, such as forming students personally and spiritually. However, that does not mean they cannot be discerned in some way and demonstrated to key constituents—internally and externally—from donors to accreditors. Just because something is hard to assess does not mean it is impossible to assess or not worth trying. To be sure, it sometimes requires some form of proxy. For example, one cannot truly know whether students are growing internally in their walk with God, but one can observe certain behaviors that are indicative of such growth within one's particular context, such as time spent in private devotions, participation in public worship, involvement in ministry activities, interactions with peers and professors, and so on.

Sometimes schools will begin an assessment plan by thinking of what it is they can easily count or track, rather than starting with the question of what it is they want to know and then working backward to find data that will help answer those specific questions. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to too much data and not enough useful information. It also tends to minimize the complexity of assessing theological education. We are reminded of the man who lost his keys one night and was looking for them under a street light. A passerby asked him if he could remember the last place he had them, to which he responded, "Down the street." Asked why he didn't look for them there, the man replied, "The light is better here." Assessment needs to look even where the light is not good.

Yet another limit and challenge in assessment is "faculty resistance." While that may be dwindling, it is still real—especially in these challenging economic times when everyone seems to be doing more with less. Faculty, already feeling like the ancient Hebrews in Egypt ("more bricks, less straw"), may feel like this is just one more brick (or the last straw). Assessment is sometimes perceived by professors as another "unfunded mandate" from some accreditation bureaucrats and a "faddish" one at that. But if assessment is a fad, it has long legs—by North American higher education standards—going back at least 40 years. And given the present climate in Washington and in more and more provincial capitals in Canada, calls for increased quality

Part of the joy and reward of effective assessment is having meaningful faculty conversations about how well students are learning what faculty feel they need to learn—what is working and what needs attention.

assurance and accountability in documenting student learning will likely only get louder.

Other faculty argue that they have been doing assessment all along—in the form of grading. To be sure, *course grades are a form of assessment*, and they should not be simply dismissed as of no value. They can certainly be a part of a school's assessment efforts, but accreditors and the public—your peers and your constituents—long ago stopped viewing course grades as sufficient to tell the whole story of what students are learning. Four reasons for that come to mind: (1) course grades can be rather arbitrary (just ask any student), (2) course grades usually signify the perception of an individual instructor rather than the evaluative consensus of faculty as a whole, (3) course grades are notorious for inflation (“Grades here run the gamut from A- to A+”), and (4) course grades focus on individual students and individual courses, rather than on the goals embedded in an entire degree program. Course grades may tell part of the story, but much is lost (including cocurricular experiences and the progress and cumulative effect of a student's learning) if these receive too much weight. Similarly, tracking all course (or even assignment) grades can be distracting or can lead to more data than might be useful.

Related to the course grade challenge is the tendency of some faculty to focus their assessment efforts on individual students, rather than to see assessment also as a faculty-wide enterprise that looks at student learning institutionally and not just individually. The danger for many is to see only the trees and not the forest. This challenge will be discussed later in the first part of section 5.

Part of the joy and reward of effective assessment is having meaningful faculty conversations about how well students are learning what faculty feel they need to learn—what is working and what needs attention. As one faculty member finally acknowledged: “Assessment isn't *extra* work; it is our work.” It is part of the vocation of faculty. As teachers, we want to know if our students are learning what we hope they are learning. As scholars, we are trained to evaluate texts and other works to see where they are strong and where they are weak. Assessment draws on the faculty's natural curiosity (Did my students learn this?), educational passion (I want my students to learn this!), and scholarly expertise (I know what learning looks like).

Assessment of theological education is no less a challenge and no less a reward than poetry—more art than science.

Perhaps the most important limit and challenge to assessment is that schools will get so involved in doing it that they forget *why* they are doing it. Some of the more disheartening examples of that are assessment plans that on paper seem to have every “jot and tittle” of what the books say assessment should have but in principle and practice have no “heart and soul” of why the effort is even worth it. Such plans are all science and no art, written only to satisfy an accreditation requirement, with no chance of making any difference in those schools’ purposes or people or programs.

Such mechanistic approaches to assessment recall a scene early in the movie, *The Dead Poets Society*. A new teacher, played by Robin Williams, has a student read aloud the introduction to a textbook on poetry. The book’s author mechanically wrote that every poem could be plotted formulaically on a scale of “(1) perfection and (2) importance, thus determining its greatness.” Williams’ character, chagrined at the mechanical rigidity of this form of assessment, tells his students to rip that page out of their textbooks with this memorable line: “We’re not laying pipe. We’re talking about poetry. I mean how can you describe poetry like American Bandstand? Well, I like Byron, I give him a 42, but I can’t dance to it. . . . [Poetry] reminds us that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.” Assessment is not numbers on a Likert scale. Assessment of theological education is no less a challenge and no less a reward than poetry—more art than science. “We’re not laying pipe. We’re talking about . . . people and purpose and passion—about mission and ministry.” *That is why assessment is important. What will your verse be?*

Section 3

A Definition and Description of Assessment

The General Institutional Standards focus on institutional evaluation, and the Educational Standard and Degree Program Standards focus on assessment of student learning. We mention both here briefly, but the subject of this guide is assessment of student learning, not institutional evaluation—though the two are clearly interrelated.

In one of the clearest treatments on the topic, *Assessment: Clear and Simple*, Barbara Walvoord defines the term this way: “Assessment is the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning” (2004, p. 2). One ATS member school defines it this way: “Assessment is a sustained effort to help us better achieve our mission by establishing mission-related goals for our programs, collecting and evaluating evidence around those goals, and then using that evidence to improve—our school, our students, ourselves.” Another member frames the assessment of student learning this way. “Assessment is asking ourselves these important questions: What do we want our students to learn (know/be/do) in light of our mission? How do we know whether or not they are learning it? And how can we use that information to improve their learning?”

Other schools have other definitions. In the end, definition is not nearly as important as implementation. Perhaps you can identify with this ATS dean: “Our difficulty is that we think we have resolved this just by talking about it. We need to *do something*.” Two leading experts in assessment highlight that very point in their book, *Assessment Essentials*, observing that the important question is not how assessment is defined, but whether assessment is used (Palomba and Banta, 1999).

The ATS Commission Standards do not have a precise definition of assessment but focus instead on how assessment should be used, including a framework for doing that well. The Standards talk about two related terms—evaluation and assessment—to describe the larger concept. The *General Institutional Standards* focus on *institutional evaluation*, and the *Educational Standard and Degree Program Standards* focus on *assessment of student learning*. We mention both here briefly, but the subject of this guide is assessment of student learning, not institutional evaluation—though the two are clearly interrelated, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

It may be worth mentioning here that some of the latest literature on assessment increasingly distinguishes between *student outcomes* and *student learning outcomes* (see, for example, *Higher Education Outcomes Assessment for the Twenty-First Century*, 2013). Student outcomes tend to focus on such things as graduation and placement rates, or the cost and time to complete a degree, including issues of student debt. Those are issues that might be more institutional in nature. Some of those may fall under what the Commission Standards refer to as institutional evaluation, though they may also legitimately fall under what the Standards call degree program goals because they deal with educational effectiveness (see 5.a below). Student learning outcomes tend to focus on what students actually learn through their curricular and cocurricular experiences. While the two are not unrelated, it is the assessment of student *learning* outcomes, rather than student outcomes (or institutional evaluation) that is the special focus of this guide. That said, the components of effective institutional evaluation are still central to effective assessment.

Institutional evaluation is described in General Institutional Standard 1 (section 1.2.2) in this way:

Evaluation is a *critical element in support of integrity to institutional planning and mission fulfillment*. Evaluation is a process that includes (1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance; (2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals; (3) the assessment of the performance of the program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment. Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for institutional vitality and educational effectiveness (emphasis added).

That introductory statement forms the foundation for all institutional evaluation—and for all assessment of student learning. It identifies up front the four foundational elements of any good evaluation plan or effective assessment process: (1) *identification* of desired goals or outcomes, (2) *information* about how well those goals or outcomes are being achieved, (3) *interpretation* of that information by key players,

especially faculty, and (4) *implementation* of those interpretations for the purpose of meaningful improvement (see section 5).

Assessment of student learning is described in the ATS Commission's Educational Standard, section ES.6.1, in this way:

A school shall maintain *an ongoing process for assessing student learning outcomes and degree program goals*. An effective plan of assessment should be as simple and sustainable as possible while adequate to answer fundamental questions about educational effectiveness. This plan should include (1) a *process for evaluating* components of the full degree program in an ongoing manner; (2) the identification of appropriate *direct and indirect indicators* of student learning; (3) the routine *involvement of faculty* in the review and evaluation of the results of the assessment; and (4) *linking assessment results to curriculum and educational planning, institutional strategic planning, and resource allocation* (emphasis added).

We will spend the rest of this guide unpacking these two statements from the ATS Commission Standards. Before that, it may be helpful to say a brief word here about formative vs. summative assessment. **Formative assessment** is sometimes called assessment for student learning and focuses on *in-process* strategies that provide faculty immediate feedback on what is working and what is not (e.g., asking students in the middle of a class session or term or program if they “get” it). **Summative assessment** is sometimes called assessment of student learning and focuses on *end-product* strategies that provide faculty ultimate or penultimate feedback on whether students “got” what they were supposed to learn. Both are important, but this guide focuses on the latter.

Section 4

Three Guiding Questions for Effective Assessment

Educational Standard, section ES.6.1, quoted at the end of the previous section states that “*assessment should be as simple and sustainable as possible while adequate [sufficient] to answer fundamental questions about educational effectiveness.*” This highlights three key questions to guide effective assessment:

4.a Is it simple?

The ATS Board of Commissioners gives no extra credit for extra length. In fact, some of the *least* effective assessment plans it has seen are some of the *longest*. Given that half of all ATS member schools have fewer than 150 students, 10 full-time faculty, and three degree programs, it is just not reasonable nor necessary for most schools to have elaborate assessment plans and results that run into dozens, scores, or even hundreds of pages. Even for larger schools, it is important that clarity trump length. Some of the most effective assessment plans that the ATS Commissioners have seen are only a few pages long, with assessment results summarized in one or two pages per degree program (though the raw data behind those summaries might be more extensive).

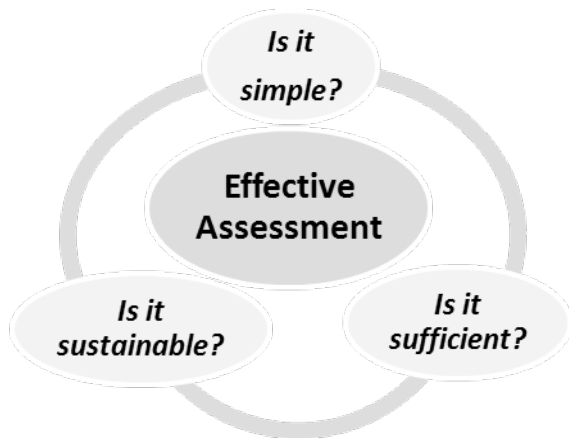
If faculty are not seriously engaged in assessment with meaningful conversations about the results, then the plan is pointless and the results useless.

In part, this is a pragmatic concern: faculty simply do not have the time to pore over pages upon pages (or screen after screen) of assessment data. And if faculty are not seriously engaged in assessment with meaningful conversations about the results, then the plan is pointless and the results useless. Such a plan and process would also not meet the ATS Commission’s Educational Standard, section ES.6.4, which “requires that faculty review and analyze the results of the assessment activities, discern appropriate changes to curriculum and educational practices, and document the results . . .” (section ES 6.4.1). To be sure, a school may *designate a person* as its assessment coordinator to help the faculty do assessment, but a school *may not delegate assessment to any one person* or office in order to bypass the faculty as a whole.

A key strategy to keep assessment simple is to keep the first factor in assessment simple, namely the number of degree program goals or

student learning outcomes (see the discussion on these two concepts in 5.a below). Schools need to *think carefully about how many goals or outcomes are appropriate for each degree*, particularly in light of their mission and context. The ATS Board of Commissioners has seen too many “best-laid plans . . . go awry” because schools tried to assess too

much. Many ATS member schools have found it useful to focus on four to seven goals or outcomes per degree program, not 14 to 17, even though each goal or outcome may have several components (see 5.a below). Schools that name too many goals (20 or 30 or more) often have a hard time adequately assessing those goals, and they may also struggle to be able to name or explain them to stakeholders.



Goals or outcomes are not meant to be a list of everything that is important to you or everything that you hope your students will learn. (Individual classes will still have their own course objectives

to cover more specific learning outcomes.) Rather, they should focus on key factors that give a picture of a successful graduate and help demonstrate that you are doing what you say you are doing, including attention to the program content areas described in the applicable Degree Program Standard. Sometimes the first step in assessment is to do less, not more. Cutting the number of degree program goals or student learning outcomes may be the first step in keeping your assessment efforts simple.

In addition to simplifying your list of goals or outcomes, another strategy toward a simple assessment plan is to remember that most schools already have a wealth of ongoing assessment information but may not realize it. Some of this information may exist within artifacts that are created in individual courses but not be known or reviewed by the faculty more broadly. For example, a senior reflection paper or an integrative paper in a class typically taken just prior to graduation or a sermon or case study at an internship site might provide very useful data about a particular degree program goal or student learning outcome. However, the assessment results for that assignment might be known only to the faculty member who assigns it. Documenting those already-reviewed results for broader discussion among the

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whole faculty could be a good way to keep your assessment efforts simple.

Using these sorts of “course-embedded assessments” is an extension of the principle raised earlier not to reinvent the wheel, but “to begin where you are” by using what you already have. If you want to assess how well your MDiv students can exegete a first-century text for a twenty-first-century audience and you have existing MDiv course assignments that require students to do that, aggregate all of those student assignments for your overall assessment. You don’t need to develop an entirely new artifact or assessment tool. Other information might exist at an intuitive or occasional level but needs to be concretized and regularized within the life of the faculty. For example, faculty might discuss the curriculum when they are preparing to start a faculty search, or when something particularly good or bad or surprising happens, but not in the regular and ongoing way that good assessment planning requires.

Other data may exist but need to be synthesized and documented into an accessible, communicable format. For example, a new program would understandably not yet have any data on what graduates have learned. However, one can assume that a new program came about as a result of some form of assessment (faculty conversations, task force work, curricular discussions, student interviews, engagement with constituencies for whom the program is intended, etc.)—at least in terms of what the intended learning outcomes for the new program should be. All of those efforts represent valid assessment efforts. Those efforts may just need to be synthesized and documented for both internal and external reviewers. Schools are often criticized for not having a *culture of assessment*, when more often what is lacking is a *culture of documentation*. Such documentation allows a school to satisfy the Standards and the expectations of external reviewers, sets up a school to engage thoughtfully and intentionally in systematic review and analysis of data (it is hard to analyze intuition or institutional memory!), and also helps everyone to “tell your story well,” as mentioned earlier. Some examples of such documentation might include minutes or notes from faculty or board meetings, or proposals from curricular review committees. The first appendix to this document also provides more common examples of how schools might document assessment results.

Schools are often criticized for not having a culture of assessment, when more often what is lacking is a culture of documentation.

In terms of documenting assessment, the ATS Board of Commissioners does not require any particular assessment model, but many schools find the classic “Nichols model,” or some variation of his “5-column model,” to be a helpful way to maintain a *simple* assessment process. James O. Nichols, a university director of institutional effectiveness, pioneered in the early 1990s a five-step process for connecting the assessment of student learning outcomes to institutional effectiveness and to improvement. The full five columns include (1) institutional or departmental goals, (2) student learning outcomes, (3) means of assessment and criteria for success, (4) summary of assessment data collected, and (5) use of results. Nichols’ 1996 classic, *A Practitioner’s Handbook for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes Assessment Implementation*, has gone through several editions and iterations. Variations on the original Nichols model are widely used in higher education circles today (see Appendix 1 for examples). The key is to keep it simple, while still sustainable and sufficient/adequate—as we discuss below.

4.b Is it sustainable?

To say that assessment should be simple does not mean it should be simplistic or easy. Good assessment takes careful thought and hard work—sustained over time. Again, as the ATS Commission Educational Standard, section ES.6.1, reminds us, assessment “should be as simple *and* sustainable as possible.” This leads to two key and interrelated questions: Is your assessment *plan* sustainable? And, are your assessment *practices* sustained over time? A key question for accreditors is not only “How are you doing?” but also “Where have you been and where are you going?” While a first essential step is for schools to have an assessment plan (see section 6), accreditors and other stakeholders long ago stopped being satisfied with simply a *plan* for doing assessment. It is assessment *practices and results* over time that matter, especially how schools use those results over time to make educational improvements for its future.

One of the more problematic (as well as least effective) assessment practices that evaluation committees sometimes discover is that a school has gone through an intensive assessment process to prepare for an evaluation visit, but only as a one-time event. Not only is there no schedule for ongoing review, but the amount of time and effort that went into the process is often not sustainable over time.

Accreditors long ago stopped being satisfied with simply an assessment plan. It is assessment practices and results over time that matter.

Unfortunately, at times such processes also create resentment rather than buy-in from stakeholders, such that doing it next time will be even harder, not easier. Just as with other practices (think *exercise*), it is more valuable to do regular and ongoing assessment than it is to do one intense attempt every now-and-again. In preparing assessment plans and strategies, then, a school will want to think about what makes sense in its institutional context, taking into account the workload and regular rhythms of its faculty and staff, among many other factors.

While the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation are not explicit about how frequently each degree program goal or student learning outcome must be assessed, the *Educational Standard and Degree Program Standards* do use words like “ongoing” and “regular.” Schools will want to gather and assess data often enough that they can clearly demonstrate program effectiveness and can quickly assess the effect that curricular improvement or other changes (including faculty changes, course revisions, new textbooks, a shifting financial environment, and so on) are having on what students are learning. Perhaps not surprisingly, a best practice is to collect data every year and to have at least some of these data (one or more outcomes or goals) as the topic of substantial faculty conversation each year.

Incidentally, schools preparing self-study reports often ask how many years’ worth of data should be included in the report. While that varies due to several factors (e.g., time since last accreditation visit, nature of changes in the school, type of data being collected, etc.), there needs to be enough data to show what the trends are. And it typically takes at least three points (years) to plot a trend. Anything less doesn’t say anything about where you are going or where you have been, only where you are. As with other data presented in a self-study or ATS report, you will want to use (and analyze) enough data to show the path you’ve traveled to get where you are today, as well as how you’re making decisions to move forward from here. Remember again that the goal of assessment isn’t for assessment’s sake, but rather for ongoing educational and institutional improvement as you seek to live out your mission.

One last element of sustainability relates to the idea that evaluation of student learning is the responsibility of “the faculty” (ES.6.4)—as a whole, not just a committee or a few individuals. As noted earlier,

Perhaps the most fundamental question to ask is whether your assessment helps your school achieve your mission.

grading can be subjective; the same is true with assessment. In addition to identifying artifacts (or other sources for raw data), good assessment plans also include descriptive criteria so that assessment happens in a consistent fashion, even if personnel change. For example, rubrics (see 5.b and Appendix 3) can ensure that both students and faculty and any outside reviewers know clearly what is expected and what has been achieved. This also recalls the point raised earlier about course grades, namely that grades can be an effective means of assessing some things, but utilizing grading or scoring rubrics developed by several faculty is a better practice because it is more sustainable in terms of offering consistency and reliability. It also offers a broader lens through which to view what your institution means by degree program effectiveness.

4.c Is it sufficient to answer fundamental questions about educational effectiveness?

Perhaps the most fundamental question to ask is whether your assessment helps your school achieve your mission. That is why the ATS Board of Commissioners pays such close attention to member schools' assessment efforts. Assessment is about mission. For assessment to address the mission question, it requires that degree program goals or student learning outcomes are connected in some way to the school's mission.

Degree program goals, typically expressed in terms of student learning outcomes (but see discussion under 5.a), should reflect in some way the mission and ethos of that school. Doing so helps a school answer the most important question it can ask itself: Are we accomplishing our mission? That question also helps a school to align its assessment efforts with its missional context. Or, as Educational Standard, section ES.6.2.1, puts it: "The process and goals of assessment shall be conducted in ways that are congruent with the educational mission of the school."

We repeat here the point made earlier: effective assessment tells your story well because it asks the questions *you* care about, based on criteria that are defined by *you* and matter to *you*. Good assessment draws on what *you* already know and what *you* value—in the larger communal context of ATS Commission expectations set by all member schools. And what *you* value depends on *your* mission. For example,

a university divinity school with a strong missional focus on research (publish or perish) will likely assess its student learning outcomes differently than a Roman Catholic seminary whose primary mission is to prepare priests for ministry (publish or parish). The former might look at such things as the number of PhD graduates finding careers in the professorate or the number of student papers published, while the latter may consider such things as the number of MDiv graduates serving in parishes or the quality of homilies preached.

One strategy in linking assessment to mission is to develop a curricular map, though this approach may not appeal to everyone. Think of the classic periodic table of elements from chemistry class, as the sample table below illustrates. This strategy invites faculty to align graphically the core courses of a program with the goals or outcomes for that program. We suggest core courses because assessment focuses on all students' general experiences, whereas elective courses are often taken by only a few students. As illustrated in the table below, however, the curriculum is not necessarily limited to formal courses taught in a classroom (onsite, offsite, or online). Some parts of the curriculum—at least for ministry-oriented degree programs—are best delivered by experiences outside the classroom, such as supervised ministry or formational experiences. Those conversations typically require faculty to engage with administrators, particularly those who oversee those nonclassroom experiences. Those are still, however, important parts of a program's overall curriculum and need to be assessed and addressed.

Sample (and Simplified) Curricular Map					
	Course A	Course B	Course C	Experience D	How Often Goal Addressed
Goal/Outcome 1	X		X	X	3
Goal/Outcome 2	X				1
Goal/Outcome 3					0
Goal/Outcome 4	X			X	2
How Many Goals Addressed by Course	3	0	1	2	6

The point of a curricular map is not for faculty to check boxes on a grid. The point is to get faculty talking about how well their courses help achieve their program's goals or outcomes, which, in turn, should help advance the school's mission.

The point of a curricular map is to facilitate faculty conversations about how well the program's goals are covered by the program's curriculum. In the example above, faculty might want to discuss why Goal/Outcome 3 is not covered by any curricular requirements or why Course B does not address any program goal or outcome. It could be that Goal/Outcome 3 needs to be deleted, or some core courses need to be added or revised. And, it could be that Course B should no longer be core, or even be taught. Remember, however, that the number of boxes is "better weighed than counted," meaning that having only one box checked may be more than adequate, while having three boxes checked may reflect needless redundancy more than necessary reinforcement. To address such concerns, some faculty take the curricular map a step further and, instead of using simple "Xs" in boxes, use a more informative code, such as "I" (this course introduces that goal/outcome), "R" (this course reinforces that goal/outcome), or "C" (this course is the culmination of that goal/outcome in this program).

The point of this strategy is not for faculty to check boxes on a grid. The point is to get faculty talking about how well their courses help achieve their program's goals or outcomes, which, in turn, should help advance the school's mission. Remember that, while effective assessment often causes a school to revise its curriculum to achieve an outcome (per Educational Standard, section ES.6.4.1), sometimes assessment results can cause a school instead to change a goal or an outcome. For example, if the evidence suggests that students really are learning what faculty want them to learn in that program, even though what they are learning does not align with some current program goals or outcomes, then those goals/outcomes may need to be changed. The operative issue here is that any assessment plan needs to be not only simple and sustainable, but also sufficient: *adequate to answer fundamental questions about educational effectiveness.*

There are many ways to show that a plan is sufficient or adequate, most of which relate to some sort of demonstrable change, a closing of the loop. When the plan is not adequate, then it is the element that may need to change; as Educational Standard, section ES.6.2.4, notes: "Schools shall include in their assessment plans a comprehensive evaluation of the assessment plan itself. . . ." One of the least effective assessment reports that ATS Commissioners have seen was simply a

The principle behind this Standard is that assessment is not only about improvement but also about accountability.

submission of pages upon pages of raw data from student surveys—with no analysis (or even synthesis) of those results, no indication of what faculty did with those results, and no list of improvements made from those results. A school that discovers that it is collecting data that it does not analyze or analyzing data that never leads to change or improvement will likely find that it needs to assess and revise its assessment plan.

Before leaving this discussion about the third guiding question for effective assessment (namely, “Is it adequate [sufficient] to answer fundamental questions about educational effectiveness?”), it is worth noting the requirement described in the ATS Commission’s Educational Standard, section ES.6.4.4: “The institution shall, on a regular basis, *make available to the public a summary evaluation of the educational effectiveness of its approved degree programs*. The school shall determine the frequency and manner of this information” (emphasis added). Regarding “educational effectiveness,” this requirement raises the bar (and enlarges the audience) for assessment, since such information is to be made public. The principle behind this Standard is that assessment is not only about improvement but also about accountability—as we discussed in section 1 under the purpose and importance of assessment. That includes accountability to the various publics our member schools serve.

The ATS Board of Commissioners provides further guidance on this “public” requirement, as described in its *Policy Manual* (section V.G.3.c):

The Board understands Educational Standard, section ES.6.4.4 (regarding the institution making available to the public information regarding its educational effectiveness) to include *such data as time to completion, numbers of completers, and placement rates], as well as qualitative evaluation information indicating the educational effectiveness* of the school’s degree programs. Information regarding educational effectiveness may be provided in summary form as determined by the school (emphasis added).

Section 1.4.2 of each Degree Program Standard also requires “measures such as the percentage of students who complete the program and the percentage of graduates who find placement appropriate to their vocational intentions.” We understand that many schools do not

“place” students for a variety of denominational reasons. As part of the Annual Report Forms, the ATS Board of Commissioners, however, still requires member schools to track and report placement data for each degree program, regardless of who does the placing. For a discussion of the place of such things as placement rates and graduation rates in a guide on assessing student learning, please see 5.a in the next section.

It should be noted, however, that in asking for placement data, the ATS Commission on Accrediting does not assume that all degree programs have a vocational intent or that employment is always the best indicator of “student success.” We understand that many students enroll in member schools more for personal growth than for professional placement. In fact, the ATS Annual Report Form has a category intentionally called “non-vocational placement.” Nonetheless, placement data can still be an important indicator of educational effectiveness, with the understanding that placement does not simply mean “graduates got jobs.” Schools will want to connect placement rates to their own mission and context. For some schools, anything less than a 100 percent placement rate might be worrisome. For others, particularly for certain programs, placement might not be as useful (or as valued) an indicator regarding educational effectiveness.

It is also important to draw on other factors to fill in the story of placement. For example, are students perceived as being prepared or successful in their placements? Insights of those who supervise new graduates, as well as those served by new graduates, can be particularly useful here. Do students stay in their careers and excel or advance in the ways one might predict, or do they drop out or find only limited success in their work? By asking these sorts of questions, placement becomes a story, rather than just a statistic.

Many schools choose to make public in their statements of educational effectiveness not only direct measures expressed in quantitative terms (such as placement rates per degree program) but also indirect measures expressed in qualitative terms (such as synopses of student testimonials about their educational experiences or snippets of exit interviews). Some schools also provide results from student satisfaction surveys, which are typically indirect measures expressed in quantitative terms (e.g., our students rated their overall experiences here at 4.6 out of 5). Some combinations of all these can make a compelling

case, and help the school “tell its story well.” More information about direct and indirect measures and about quantitative and qualitative data will be presented in the second part of section 5.

Section 5

Four Foundations of Effective Assessment

The four foundations of effective assessment have already been introduced in section 3 above. They are found in General Institutional Standard 1, section 1.2.2, and may be summarized as follows:

1. *Identification* of desired goals or outcomes for each degree program
2. *Information* on the achievement of those goals or outcomes per program
3. *Interpretation* of that information by key players, especially by faculty
4. *Implementation* of those interpretations for meaningful improvement

5.a Identification of desired goals or outcomes for each degree program

The ATS Commission Standards frequently use two related terms: *degree program goals* and *student learning outcomes*. While these two terms are often used distinctively in the Standards, they are sometimes used synonymously. For example, each Degree Program Standard has separate sections for “Primary Goals of the Program (section 1.2 of each) and for “Learning Outcomes” (section 1.3 of each). Section 1.3.1 of many of those Degree Program Standards explains the relationship between the two this way: “The primary goals of the program shall be further delineated as demonstrable learning outcomes.” On the other hand, their relationship can be so close as to be interchangeable, as evidenced by the very next line in section 1.3.1: “Institutions shall demonstrate that students have achieved the goals *or* learning outcomes of the degree program . . .” (emphasis added). While schools may choose to have separate goals and outcomes, perhaps the simplest way to think of these two terms is synonymously: student learning outcomes are a way to state degree program goals in terms that focus on what the school wants all students in that program to have learned by the time they graduate.

Regardless of the terms used, the assessment of student learning requires schools to use language that focuses on what students are learning (what it is that schools want students in a given program to know, do, be, feel, etc.). That typically requires active verbs that reflect some demonstrable behavior on the part of the students, such as “students will explain X” or “graduates will demonstrate Y” or “students will identify Z.” These brief examples are not meant to be exemplars of student learning outcomes. For clearer, more complete model outcomes statements, an Internet search on “student learning outcomes examples” will yield a wealth of help. Two of the more helpful sites are found at the [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and at the [National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment](#) (NILOA).

At this point, it is worth pointing out possible exceptions to the principle just stated. There may be occasions when degree program goals are better stated in terms of the institution, rather than the student. For example, an institution may have as a goal that the degree program has a certain graduation or placement rate, or be financially sound or demonstrate diversity. Those are all appropriate goals for a degree program and appropriate issues to assess for educational effectiveness, but they would not be articulated as student learning outcomes. In addition, while student learning outcomes are to be communicated publicly “through the school’s catalog, website, and course syllabi” (ES.6.4.2), some institutionally oriented degree program goals are better kept as nonpublic, internal goals (e.g., financial results or admissions targets). To be sure, some would argue that such things as graduation or placement rates do not assess student learning at all but rather relate to institutional evaluation (see section 3 regarding *student outcomes* vs. *student learning outcomes*). Our point is that these can be “indicators of program effectiveness” (to quote the opening line to Educational Standard, section ES.6). As such, they are legitimate areas to review in determining how well a school is achieving its educational mission—a key purpose of this guide.

The previous point notwithstanding, student learning outcomes should be stated in terms of what schools want their students to learn (i.e., know, do, be, feel, etc.) as a result of completing the program. In doing so, it may be tempting to wax poetic or be overly aspirational in stating goals or outcomes (e.g., our students will change the world).

However, the *Degree Program Standards* require that degree program goals be “delineated as *demonstrable* learning outcomes congruent with the institution’s mission” (see, for example, sections A.1.3.1 or B.1.3.1). In writing a student learning outcome, it is important to use language that allows the school to demonstrate how well students in that program have achieved that outcome. For example, an outcome that “graduates of this program will be spiritually mature” could be hard to demonstrate, whereas “graduates of this program will demonstrate spiritual maturity in the following ways . . .” [and then list some ways that are important for that school’s mission and context] will allow a school to design assessment strategies focused on “those ways.”

The most basic unit of assessment is the individual student, so that is a good place to begin—but not a good place to end. Effective assessment focuses on each and every degree program, not simply each and every student.

It may be important at this point to highlight an important expectation in the ATS Commission Standards relative to assessing student learning. While student learning outcomes should focus on students, assessment of student learning is not primarily about *individual* students. We understand that it is important for a school to know if Jane or John or Juan is doing well as an individual student (not to mention how important that is to Jane or John or Juan). But we believe it is even more important for a school to know how well all of its Janes and Johns and Juans are achieving its degree program goals or outcomes. To be sure, the most basic unit of assessment is the individual student, so that is a good place to begin—but not a good place to end. Many ATS member schools excel at assessing individual students but fail to move from individual instances into institutional conversations about how well their degree programs are achieving their goals or outcomes for all students, and how, in turn, achieving those goals or outcomes help the school achieve its mission.

Before turning to the second foundation of effective assessment, it is important in identifying desired goals or outcomes to recall a point we raised earlier in section 4. To keep assessment simple (and sustainable), the number of degree program goals or student learning outcomes needs to be manageable. Many ATS member schools have found four to seven goals or outcomes per degree program to be a reasonable number, giving due attention to the program content areas described in section 2 of the *Degree Program Standards*. A word of caution may be in order here. To keep things simple, some schools may have two or more degree programs whose goals or outcomes overlap. While some

overlap is acceptable and even perhaps inevitable (e.g., three of the four content areas for the MDiv and the professional MA overlap), it is not acceptable simply to use the same exact set of degree program goals or student learning outcomes for more than one degree—with no distinctions in those degrees in terms of goals or outcomes. This point is highlighted in Educational Standard, section ES.1.1.1:

When Commission institutions offer more than one degree program, *they shall articulate the distinctions among the degrees with regard to their educational and vocational intent.* Institutions shall *articulate the goals and objectives of each degree program* they offer and assure that the design of its curriculum is in accordance with the institutional purpose and the Commission Standards of Accreditation (emphasis added).

In addition, while the number of goals or outcomes should be fairly “simple,” that doesn’t mean each goal or outcome cannot address complex issues. Some goals or outcomes may have several parts or “indicators” (see 5.b below). Nor does simplicity require schools to set the bar so low in wording a goal or outcome that achievement of that goal or outcome is virtually automatic for every student in that degree program. The bar is best set where the faculty (and key constituents) believe it should be set, even if that means some initial results may be a bit discouraging. To quote Browning, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what’s a heaven for?” On the other hand, the bar should not be set so high that degree program goals or student learning outcomes defy achievement. We are reminded of a doctoral advisor who discouraged anyone from writing a dissertation in her area of expertise with these disheartening words, “Only the impossible is worth doing, and you’re not qualified to do that.” In the following paragraphs we will discuss further how the goals or outcomes of a degree program can be evaluated and achieved.

Collecting the right information is a critically important component of assessment.

5.b Information on the achievement of those goals or outcomes per program

It is worth noting that the *Educational Standard* has a separate section just on data (section ES.6.3). Collecting the right information is a critically important component of assessment. We recall one semi-nary dean who complained that his school all too often made important decisions on the basis of *the bias of the vivid example*. When his

colleagues met around the decision-making table, the “best story” often carried the day, even if that story was not at all normative or verifiable beyond that singularly vivid example. Collecting the right kinds of information is crucial, though that does not diminish in any way the power of a really good story—as long as meaningful data exist to support the memorable story. In the end, the information or data collected—whether a statistic or a story or both—must be sufficient to demonstrate how well the goal or outcome being assessed has been accomplished.

The section on assessment data (ES.6.3) highlights two important pairs of data or kinds of information, both of which are vital to understanding how well goals/outcomes are being achieved. Those two pairs are qualitative and quantitative kinds of information (ES.6.3.1), and direct and indirect measures (ES.6.3.2). This part of section 5 will look at those two pairs of information, along with three other important factors in collecting information, using these subheadings:

- Qualitative and quantitative information
- Direct and indirect measures
- Benchmarks or performance indicators
- Rubrics
- Demography and delivery

Regarding the overall collection of assessment information, this guide is too brief to discuss the myriad ways that schools might manage the data they collect. Those ways range from simple spreadsheets to proprietary programs on assessment that manage thousands of pieces of information. Here, too, the watchwords should be simple, sustainable, and sufficient.

Qualitative and quantitative information

Both qualitative and quantitative information provide important and useful evidence in effective assessment. Too often it is assumed that for assessment to be effective it must use only numbers, not narratives. In reality, there is a story behind most every statistic, and some stories simply cannot be told well with statistics alone. Some schools may have the mistaken impression that if assessment results are expressed quantitatively (e.g., our students ranked this at 4.5 out of 5), then somehow those results are more reliable or more objective.

Even the act of gathering quantitative data is inherently subjective: what data are gathered, how they are gathered, and from whom they are gathered are all subjective decisions. This caveat is not meant to diminish the value of quantitative data but to emphasize the equally important role that qualitative data can play. Effective assessment plans have both.

Others get so excited about numeric data that it overshadows the point of the data itself, which is to serve the goals of analysis and improvement.

To be sure, quantitative data can be very useful and should be part of any school's assessment plan, but it is a bit of a fallacy to assume that because assessment results are expressed numerically, they are not also subjective. All results are subject to interpretation (see 5.c below). In fact, without interpretation, assessment results are fairly useless. Even the act of gathering quantitative data is inherently subjective: *what* data are gathered, *how* they are gathered, and *from whom* they are gathered are all subjective decisions. This caveat is not meant to diminish the value of quantitative data but to emphasize the equally important role that qualitative data can play. Effective assessment plans have both. Evaluation committees who visit member schools want to see, for example, some statistical data about how well students rate their educational experiences, but they also want to interview students and hear firsthand the nuances that numbers can't communicate. For further discussion about using numbers in assessment, see Appendix 2: Excursus on Quantitative Data.

Effective assessment recognizes the interrelated nature of quantitative and qualitative data. For example, a school might conduct a qualitative review of masters' theses but express those qualitative results in quantitative terms. In this example, a school might conclude that when faculty used an agreed-upon rubric to conduct a qualitative review of 10 randomly chosen MA theses written over the past five years, it found that 40 percent demonstrated achievement of all four MA student learning outcomes at the highest (4) level, while the remaining 60 percent achieved all four outcomes at an acceptable (3) level.

Direct and indirect measures

Direct and indirect measures are also both important and useful ways to gather evidence for effective assessment—and either can be expressed in quantitative or qualitative ways. The simplest distinction between these two is this: direct measures assess *student performance*, while indirect measures assess *student perceptions*. For example, a juried music recital is a direct measure of a student's performance, while a survey of students about the educational effectiveness of a music class is an indirect measure of students' perceptions. Most ATS

Direct measures assess student performance, while indirect measures assess student perceptions.

member schools tend to have a wealth of indirect measures of student perceptions, the most common being course evaluation results. However, Educational Standard, section ES.6.3.2, “requires *both direct* (performance based) *and indirect* (perception based) *measures* of student learning” (emphasis added). Assessment based only on indirect measures runs the risk of not being able to document *what* (or *that*) students actually learned, only what they *think* they learned. On the other hand, indirect measures help a school understand the level of student satisfaction that exists—and in this consumer-oriented higher education landscape a school not concerned about student satisfaction runs the risk of losing students. Indirect measures also value the opinions and expertise that students, as adult learners, bring to their own learning. They are often an appropriate judge of whether a particular learning goal was met, even if they ought not be taken as the only judge. For example, both the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) and Alumni/ae Questionnaire (AQ) are examples of indirect measures, largely in the form of questions about student satisfaction. These indirect measures can provide very helpful information to a school but become stronger when paired with direct measures, such as artifacts and observations.

For more information on these and other ATS assessment instruments (e.g., the Institutional Peer Profile Report [IPPR] and the Strategic Information Report [SIR]), please visit the ATS website under [Accrediting > Self Study and Assessment](#). The use of these instruments by ATS member schools is strictly voluntary. Using these instruments does not guarantee a positive accreditation decision, just as not using them does not necessarily lead to a negative decision. As noted at the outset, since there is no single best way to do assessment, these ATS resources are simply tools that a school might (or might not) choose to use; and, as with any tools, they can be used well or poorly. For schools that do choose to use the ATS Q’s (a collective reference to the Entering Student Questionnaire, the Graduating Student Questionnaire, and the Alumni/ae Questionnaire), a very helpful guide for how various items from those questionnaires relate to different Commission Standards can be found on the ATS website under [Resources > Student Data > Resources for Using the Questionnaires](#). Archived report results for the Qs from all ATS member schools who choose to use those instruments can also be found under [Resources > Student Data](#).

Schools sometimes struggle with finding appropriate direct measures. Unlike music schools or law schools, theological schools do not have a tradition of requiring juried recitals or bar exams. And unlike many professional schools, there are no nationally normed tests for theology or ministry like there are for, say, psychology or dentistry. Even within denominations that have qualifying examinations or other comprehensive ordination processes, the outcomes assessed there may differ significantly from the school's program goals or outcomes or may attend only to a few of them.

Perhaps the most common type of direct measure is a culminating experience of some sort.

However, there are many different ways that ATS member schools utilize appropriate direct measures. We know of one school, for example, that actually does have "senior recitals." This school has graduating students "perform" in a scheduled event where faculty and other professionals observe them as they speak about current events, perform role-plays based on case studies, plan a strategy to address a difficult issue in a parish, and even compete in a theological "quiz bowl." These "performances" are directly linked to each of the school's degree goals or outcomes. Other schools may schedule a weekend retreat near the end of the final year during which students interact with faculty and other professionals in a variety of experiences that demonstrate how well they have achieved the goals or outcomes for their program, including oral interviews, mock lessons or even counseling sessions, and written or oral responses to various case studies.

Perhaps the most common type of direct measure is a culminating experience of some sort, such as a capstone course or summative project (MA thesis, DMin project, PhD dissertation or exam, etc.). In some capstone courses, the course objectives are simply the degree program goals or learning outcomes, with various assignments demonstrating the extent to which students have achieved each. For example, for a degree program preparing students for further graduate study, the assignments in such a course might include a research paper (demonstrating desired learning outcomes related to writing skills, research capacity, and scholarly voice), an annotated bibliography (demonstrating familiarity and fluency within a scholarly discipline), and a reflection paper that discusses the student's journey through the degree program and goals for the future (demonstrating, even if somewhat indirectly, how a student's outlook has changed as a result of completing the degree).

Supervised ministry experiences can also provide very helpful direct measures, by asking supervisors to evaluate various student “performances,” such as sermons preached, lessons taught, calls made, meetings facilitated, projects completed, and so forth. Again, those results are aggregated anonymously for faculty review to see how well the program is performing, not simply how well each student is performing. Sometimes the most telling data are the simplest: would you hire this student? For some schools, one of the most helpful measures is how students do on the denomination’s ordination exam. Those data can often be compared internally with previous classes to show trends and compared externally with other denominational seminaries to show areas of relative strength and concern.

One helpful way to enable and emphasize the use of direct measures is through student portfolios. In fact, in just the last five years, the percentage of schools—at least in the United States—using portfolios to assess student learning has skyrocketed from 5 percent to 45 percent, based on a survey of chief academic officers conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (see their March 2014 report, [Institutional Assessment Practices Across Accreditation Regions](#)). The advantage of using student portfolios is that rarely can a single assignment or activity adequately demonstrate how well the students as a whole in a degree program meet that program’s goals or outcomes, particularly in professional degree programs.

Portfolios are collections of key assignments (or artifacts) scattered throughout the curriculum that faculty decide are representative of how well each degree program goal or student learning outcome has been achieved by students in that program. Many portfolios are now collected electronically, especially in schools with learning management systems that allow students to submit selected assignments online at various points throughout their programs. Faculty later then assess (or discuss the original assessment of) those selected assignments collectively (usually without any student names) and aggregate the results, because the *purpose is to see how well all students are achieving* those program goals or outcomes, *not just how well each individual student is achieving* them.

As with any other assessment strategy, an important caveat to remember with portfolios is that they need to be closely connected to degree program goals or student learning outcomes (not simply the aggregate

of all course objectives) and to an assessment plan that is simple, sustainable, and sufficient. It is not necessary, or usually helpful, to collect every assignment that every student produces or to redo the work of the original instructor in terms of grading and feedback. A portfolio system can be quite helpful, though, when specific assignments are linked to specific learning goals (e.g., exegesis papers that demonstrate students' abilities to perform exegesis) or when assignments can demonstrate learning goals beyond their disciplinary box (e.g., sermons that were originally assigned to evaluate students' skills in homiletics might also be useful as a way of seeing whether students use the texts of their traditions in effective ways).

Benchmarks or performance indicators

Each degree program or learning outcome needs some kind of "performance indicator" or "benchmark" for the faculty to interpret assessment results meaningfully.

In using both quantitative and qualitative data through both direct and indirect measures, it is important for effective assessment to have some sense not only of what information is needed, but also of what "criteria for success" will be used to evaluate or interpret that information. While this discussion could be included under 5.c (Interpretation of information), we raise it here since it relates so closely to the information collected. Each degree program goal or learning outcome needs some kind of *performance indicator* or *benchmark* for the faculty to interpret assessment results meaningfully. Keep in mind that each goal or outcome may have more than one performance indicator or benchmark, especially for goals or outcomes that address complex issues. To be sure, the ATS Commission Standards do not use these terms. However, the *Educational Standard* does require faculty to interpret assessment results (see section ES.6.4.1). Consequently, faculty will need some way of interpreting the results in terms of whether that goal or outcome has been achieved. Many schools choose to use terms like *performance indicators* or *benchmarks* or *criteria for success* to help faculty interpret those results. For example, it is not enough to simply say that the students in this program averaged 3.5 on a 5.0 scale or rubric for a given goal or outcome. What does that 3.5 mean? Is that good or bad? Are we pleased or displeased? Are results improving or declining? Is an average the best way to assess this goal/outcome? Or should some other factors be considered (e.g., the entire group will average 3.5 or at least 80 percent of the group will score at least a 3.5)?

To ensure that any benchmark tied to a graded assignment is closely linked to learning goals and is applied fairly and uniformly over time . . . the faculty should develop a clear grading rubric.

Here is an example of how a performance indicator or benchmark helps assess a given goal or outcome. A seminary has as one of its MDiv program goals or outcomes: “Graduates proclaim Scripture with appropriate attention to the ancient context of the text and to the current context of their audience.” The seminary may use a key assignment in an exegetical course (course-embedded assessment) to measure how students achieve that goal or outcome. However, having a goal or outcome and a measure are not enough. There must also be some benchmark against which to measure whether that goal or outcome has truly been achieved through that assignment. Such a benchmark is often called a performance indicator. For example, a performance indicator or benchmark for the previously cited goal or outcome might be this: At least 85 percent of the students completing the exegetical project for Course X will receive a score of at least 3 out of 4 on a rubric for that assignment (see rubrics below). That indicator or benchmark uses both quantitative data (at least 85%, which specifies a quantity of students) and qualitative data (score of at least 3 out of 4, which attests to the quality of student projects) for this direct measure of student performance.

As noted earlier with goals or outcomes, performance levels should be set at reasonable rates. For example, to set the levels at 100 percent for every goal or outcome is typically too idealistic because the failure of a few students to achieve a given goal or outcome does not mean that the entire program is ineffective. On the other hand, setting the level at, say, only 50 percent may be too easy a target to hit. There is no magic number, only a reasonable figure developed through appropriate conversations with key constituencies for the purpose of providing useful information that might then inform efforts for improvement or change.

Rubrics

It is important at this point to highlight the value of grading or scoring rubrics. Rubrics are simply guidelines for rating student performance and one of the fastest-growing components in effective assessment. The same March 2014 NILOA report noted earlier indicates that rubrics have increased in use over the last five years from an average of less than 25 percent to nearly 70 percent among institutions of higher education—at least in the United States. To ensure that any benchmark or performance indicator tied to a graded assignment is

closely linked to learning goals and is applied fairly and uniformly over time (a key component of effective assessment), those involved in grading that exegetical project should develop a clear grading rubric. That rubric clarifies what is expected of students to achieve a B, or an A, or what would constitute a C or less. Grading rubrics for course-embedded assignments should also be tested by other qualified faculty (or even external parties appropriately qualified) to minimize the often arbitrary nature of course grades and to ensure connection to the overall degree learning goals. And some rubrics do not relate to course grades at all but are used instead to help faculty evaluate a goal or outcome that is not linked to a specific course assignment. For further discussion of rubrics, see Appendix 3: Excursus on Rubrics.

Demography and delivery

Before we leave this discussion of data collection, it is worth mentioning two other ways that data may be collected and categorized, namely by demography and by delivery. Some schools, for example, may find it very helpful to distinguish assessment data by gender, age, or race/ethnicity—issues of demography. Such data can prove very useful in devising strategies to improve student learning, since some strategies may be more effective with certain demographic groups.

Additionally, some schools may find it very helpful to distinguish assessment data in terms of delivery systems. Schools, for example, offering MDiv programs through onsite, offsite, and online modalities may want to compare what students are learning through each of those delivery systems. As with demography, the effectiveness of certain strategies to improve student learning may depend on the delivery method utilized. Such distinctions can be particularly valuable in assessing factors like personal and spiritual formation, one of the four content areas required for MDiv and professional MA degree programs. Distinguishing assessment data in these ways does not mean schools need to use totally different assessment approaches. It just may mean some schools will use the same collection instruments but disaggregate those data by demography or delivery. Having that kind of information available to faculty, and other key players, can assist in the interpretation process—the subject of the next part of this guide.

5.c Interpretation of that information by key players—especially faculty

As we noted earlier under 4.a (Is it simple?), if key players, particularly the faculty as a whole, are not seriously engaged in assessment with meaningful conversations about the results, then the assessment plan is pointless and the results are useless. That may seem like an overstatement, but the ATS Commission Standards make it abundantly clear that “the faculty” (as a whole) play the primary role in using assessment results to improve student learning. Educational Standard, section ES.6.4.1, puts it rather pointedly:

Evaluation of student learning is the **responsibility of the faculty**. Effective assessment of student learning *requires that the faculty review and analyze the results of the assessment activities, discern appropriate changes to curriculum and educational practices, and document the results of both its interpretation of assessment data and decisions about educational changes* (emphasis added).

The ATS Commission Standards place such a high priority on faculty involvement in assessment because they place such a high priority on faculty in the student learning process.

Too many assessment reports reviewed by the ATS Board of Commissioners “fail the faculty test” because there is no evidence that faculty are seriously engaged in the assessment process, at least in interpreting that information. The ATS Commission Standards place such a high priority on faculty involvement in assessment because they place such a high priority on faculty in the student learning process. If one did a Wordle™ display of the Standards, three words would dominate the graphic: theological, faculty, and students. The Standards recognize the invaluable and irreplaceable role that faculty play in communicating theological truths to students. That role is no less vital in assessment, because assessment helps a school understand how well it is achieving its mission, particularly its educational mission of enhancing student learning. While some aspects of assessment can be delegated (primarily data collection), the interpretation of assessment information rests best with the faculty who know best the aims of theological education.

Another reason why the ATS Commission Standards prioritize faculty involvement in interpreting assessment results is that faculty have the best understanding of what students should be learning. It is, after all, their curriculum. As Standard 7 on authority and governance

Assessment data can lead to poor decisions if not interpreted correctly and contextually.

(section 7.3.3.1) states: “Within the overall structure of governance of the school, authority over certain functions shall be delegated to the faculty . . . [including] oversight of academic and curricular programs and decisions.” Assessment data can lead to poor decisions if not interpreted correctly and contextually. For example, one person might see a low score on a particular program goal and conclude that something is wrong and must be fixed immediately. However, faculty involved in that degree program might well understand that the particular score in question was the result of a nonrepresentative sample (“bad classes” do happen) or was the result of a one-time experiment (since abandoned) or was due to a fault of the assessment tool (some tools may be valid, but the results are not reliable; others may have reliable results, but the tool itself does not validly measure what it is intended to measure). Anomalies do not portend a trend, and poor data can lead to poor decisions. Healthy conversations among faculty and with administrators can clarify complex data that at first seem so simple. False negatives (and false positives) can occur in assessment as much as in any kind of data-based research.

One other reason to give faculty such significant responsibility in interpreting assessment information is that the faculty are the ones who will need to make any resulting changes to improve student learning. While administrators or trustees may see what needs to be done, shared governance in a community of faith and learning calls for conversations among faculty so that any changes can be implemented with an appropriate sense of faculty ownership.

Before moving to another key player in the interpretation of assessment information, it is worth suggesting ways in which faculty can be involved without being overwhelmed. As noted above, some ATS member schools have found it helpful to delegate some aspects of assessment to other parties, such as to an administrator or staff person or even a single faculty member. That person or office typically coordinates the overall assessment plan and process, especially the collection of assessment information, which is then provided to faculty in a synthesized, manageable form. Faculty as a whole then spend their time interpreting the resulting assessment information, not in data collection, though using faculty time to evaluate key student artifacts is also quite valuable. Many ATS member schools have an “assessment day” or “assessment retreat” either at the end or the beginning of the

“The governing board of the school is responsible for ensuring that the school has a program of assessment of student learning and that the results of these activities inform and shape educational and institutional decisions.” (ES.6.4.3)

academic year. That is often a day or two of focused faculty time spent on evaluating or interpreting assessment data and sometimes also spent on reviewing artifacts of student learning.

While faculty play a vital role in interpreting assessment data (and using those interpretations to effect meaningful change, as we discuss in 5.d below), there is still one other key player in this process. As noted earlier, the current ATS Commission Standards, approved by the membership in 2012, make it clear that “the assessment buck stops” in two places: with the faculty and with the board. To cite again the ATS Commission’s Educational Standard, section ES.6.4.3: “The governing board of the school is responsible for ensuring that the school has a program of assessment of student learning and that the results of these activities inform and shape educational and institutional decisions.” A very effective way to do that is *through* the faculty, but perhaps an even more effective way might be *with* the faculty.

Some member schools, for example, involve trustees in faculty conversations about how the assessment information is interpreted. If trustees represent a school’s various constituencies, especially churches, having their input in this conversation can be a helpful “external review.” This suggestion is not meant to blur the lines between governing and teaching, but it is meant to acknowledge the vital voice that many trustees bring to the educational table. And schools who do have such engagement between faculty and trustees over assessment of student learning find renewed meaning in the phrase “shared governance” and renewed appreciation for what faculty do, day in and day out. Faculty also have a deeper appreciation for the important role that trustees play—beyond the typical financial and business aspects of the board. It allows both key players to focus on what matters most—mission.

5.d Implementation of those interpretations for meaningful improvement

When all is said and done about assessment, not answering well the “So what?” question makes the entire assessment process devolve into much ado about nothing. If assessment does not lead to improvement, the process seems pointless. Otherwise, the common faculty critique that assessment is just about satisfying some accreditation regulation is a valid one. Remember that accreditors, however, are not looking

Remember that accreditors are not looking primarily for paperwork; they are looking for improvement.

primarily for paperwork; they are looking for improvement. One of the most common questions that peer accreditors ask when they are on your campus evaluating your assessment efforts is this: What difference has this made for your students and school? They will often ask teachers and trustees to cite a few examples of how assessment led to improvement in student learning. Regardless of how elaborate the process and extensive the paperwork, if no one can readily list key changes that came from assessment, then that assessment is not effective.

To be sure, often the best interpretation of assessment information is to “stay the course,” meaning that a school is doing some things very well and should not change those things. In such cases, the right interpretation is a correct confirmation that improvements have already occurred and should simply be maintained. The ATS Board of Commissioners, however, has yet to review a school that did not need to improve in *some* area. There is no perfect seminary. And appropriate interpretation helps a school implement those changes that are truly needed and not waste its time changing just for the sake of change—or not changing at all while their educational equivalent of Rome burns around them.

In short, assessment is still about improvement. The first three components in the assessment cycle mean very little if schools don’t “close the loop” by using the information to implement meaningful changes. Early on in the assessment movement, T. J. Marchese made that connection clear with this memorable metaphor: “Assessment per se guarantees nothing by way of improvement, no more than a thermometer cures a fever” (from “Third Down, Ten Years to Go,” *AAHE Bulletin*, 1987). Assessment has a thermometer function, but it is most effective as a thermostat. Here are some examples of meaningful improvements that have been implemented as a result of appropriately interpreted assessment information:

- A school improved significantly (from 3.2 to 3.8 on a 4.0 scoring rubric) its students’ ability to integrate theology and ministry when it revised a core course to target that goal and had two faculty from each area team teach it—a strategy suggested by several students in the assessment process. Faculty expressed strong affirmation of how students are now better integrating what they learn. To quote a typical response from one professor, “I would not have

thought that this one change could make such a big difference, but our students' ability to integrate theology and ministry seems so much stronger now."

- A school improved by 15 percentage points its students' preaching skills (from 20% rated excellent by the faculty on a scoring rubric to 35%) when it used assessment data from its various preaching courses to redesign its MDiv to include preaching assignments throughout the curriculum, rather than in isolated courses. Assessment information from church leaders has confirmed the improvement noted among recent graduates. One pastor went so far as to state, "These students' improvement in preaching is nothing short of profound. Thank you."
- A school improved significantly the quality of its international students' final project (from an average grade of C+ to B+) when it used its assessment data to replace its faculty-taught writing and research course with a system of ongoing peer tutoring by student volunteers. This improvement is further demonstrated in the 25 percent increase in the number of advanced degrees being pursued by the school's international students.
- A school improved significantly its students' perception of their spiritual growth (from 3.1 to 4.3 on a 5.0 scale) when it used assessment information to supplement its faculty-led formation program with external mentors who meet weekly with students. Several students have commented that they have found "mentors for life" through this new approach.
- A school improved by 20 percent the placement rate for its MDiv degree program after instituting a capstone experience that involved denominational leaders and pastors in evaluating students' readiness for ministry—many of whom were then hired by those same leaders and pastors, who, in turn, have become more active recruiters for the school.
- A school improved significantly its completion/graduation rate for its MDiv degree program (from 65% to 90%) by redesigning its program content to make it more accessible and achievable, based on assessment data from students and in response to needs expressed by constituent churches. These improvements have

also helped the school address its long-standing financial concerns through increased student revenue.

We recall the line from *The Dead Poets Society*: “Poetry . . . reminds us that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.” Assessment is not numbers on a Likert scale. Assessment of theological education is no less a challenge and no less a reward than poetry—more art than science. “We’re not laying pipe.” We’re talking about . . . people and purpose and passion—about mission and ministry. *That* is why assessment is important. What will your verse be?

Section 6 A Checklist for Effective Assessment

This last section attempts to summarize and synthesize best practices of effective assessment in the form of a checklist, based on the “four foundations of effective assessment” above. This checklist can never be a substitute for the thoughtful and purposeful work that effective assessment requires. It is not meant to be a red-button “easy answer” to assessment. This checklist is simply a way of remembering key components of effective assessment—components that can form an effective assessment plan and process. Schools should use this as a starting point for further conversation, reflection, and action. This checklist also serves as a guide for peer reviewers and Commissioners in evaluating effective assessment.

Checklist for Effective Assessment				
1. Effective assessment plan and process	Standard*	YES	NO	IN PROCESS
a. Is appropriate mandate/oversight provided by the governing board?	ES.6.4.3			
b. Is there a designated person or office to coordinate assessment?	ES.6.2.3			
c. Does plan/process reflect school's mission, ethos, resources, and size?	ES.6.2.1,3			
d. Do faculty play a central role in the assessment process?	ES.6.4.1			
e. Is the plan/process simple, sustainable, sufficient/adequate?	ES.6.1			
f. Is the plan/process itself assessed and changed as needed?	ES.6.2.4			
Committee Comments:				
2. Identification of desired goals/outcomes—for each degree	Standard*	YES	NO	IN PROCESS
a. Are goals/outcomes clearly stated for each degree program?	ES.6.1, 6.4.2			
b. Do goals/outcomes reflect appropriate Degree Program Standards?	A-J.1.2**			
c. Are goals/outcomes expressed in demonstrable terms?	ES.6.3.1,2			
d. Are goals/outcomes manageable in number?	ES.6.1			
e. Are goals/outcomes decided by faculty in those programs?	GIS 5.3.1***			
Committee Comments:				

3. Information on the achievement of those goals/outcomes	Standard*	YES	NO	IN PROCESS
a. Does information come from both direct and indirect measures?	ES.6.3.2			
b. Does information include both quantitative and qualitative data?	ES.6.3.1			
c. Does information use some form of benchmarks?	ES.6.1(2)			
d. Does information include data about completions/ placement?	ES.6			
e. Does information not rely mostly on course grades; use rubrics?	ES.6.3			
f. Is information about individual students kept confidential?	ES.6.3.3			
Committee Comments:				
4. Interpretation of that information by key players, especially faculty	Standard*	YES	NO	IN PROCESS
a. Are the key players, especially faculty, engaged in assessment?	ES.6.4.1			
b. Do faculty have substantive conversations about assessment data?	ES.6.1(3)			
c. Do faculty review regularly the implications of this information?	ES.6.1(1)			
d. Do faculty interpret raw data in appropriate ways in light of mission?	ES.6.2.1			
Committee Comments:				
5. Implementation of those interpretations for meaningful improvement	Standard*	YES	NO	IN PROCESS
a. Do faculty interpretations lead to improvements in student learning?	ES.6.4.1			
b. Does school provide clear examples of such improvements?	ES.6			
c. Does board ensure results shape educational/institutional decisions?	ES.6.4.3			
d. Are assessment plan/process and results clearly documented?	ES.6			
e. Does school summarize key assessment results publicly and regularly?	ES.4.4			
Committee Comments:				
* Refers to the ATS Commission's <i>Educational Standard</i> (ES), unless otherwise noted below.				
** Refers to section 1.2 of each Degree Program Standard (A-J).				
*** Refers to the ATS Commission's General Institutional Standard 5 on faculty.				

Appendix 1

Sample Summaries of Assessment Results

NOTE: The samples in this appendix are meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive—to provide illustrations, not mandate models. Either of these examples might well form part of an assessment report (e.g., an appendix), but not the entire report. They need to be complemented with a narrative that provides context and nuance, including discussion about what worked well and what did not, what improvements have been made, and what still needs to be done.

Sample 1: Assessment Results Summary for an MDiv Chart Format Using Nichols Model (see 4.a)

Student Learning Outcomes	Direct and Indirect Measures	Criteria for Success (Benchmarks)	Assessment Results*	Changes Made (as appropriate)
1. Graduates will present Scripture with depth and in ways consistent with the school's statement of faith. (Standard A.2.2)	<i>Direct Measures</i> Entering Bible exam Exit Bible exam Exegesis Paper in BL702 Juried Review Sr. Sermon <i>Indirect Measures</i> ATS GSQ Table 13 ATS GSQ Table 23 Annual Alumni Survey	65% score at least 65% 85% score at least 85% 85% score 3–4 on rubric 100% rated "above avg." Average rating of 4 of 5 Average rating of 4 of 5 Average rating of 3 of 4	70% scored 65%+ 88% scored 85%+ 80% scored 3 or 4 90% rated above avg. Averaged 3.5 of 5 Averaged 4.5 of 5 Averaged 3.2 of 4	No changes; met No changes; met Added earlier paper 1 student "anomaly" (so no change) Added earlier paper No changes; met No changes; met
2. Graduates will manifest global awareness and cultural sensitivity, demonstrated through selected assignments. (Standard A.2.3)	<i>Direct Measures</i> Global engagement project Cultural awareness scale <i>Indirect Measures</i> Survey on global and cultural expressions	80% "meet expectation" on project rubric 75% score "above average" on scale Graduates average 3.5 out of 4 on survey	50% met expectations 60% scored above average Grads averaged 2.5 out of 4	None of the benchmarks for this outcome was achieved; dean appointed faculty task force to make recommendations for curricular change
3. Graduates will demonstrate mature spirituality as determined by faculty and field mentors, as well as through self-perception. (Standard A.2.4)	<i>Direct Measures</i> Field mentor evaluation Faculty advisor evaluation <i>Indirect Measures</i> Exit survey/interview Annual Alumni Survey ATS GSQ Table 19	Mentor rating of "meets or exceeds expectations" Faculty rating of "meets or exceeds expectations" Average rating of 4 of 5 Average rating of 4 of 5 Average rating of 4 of 5	No mentor ratings were collected Faculty ratings met that benchmark Averaged 3.9 of 5 Averaged 4.1 of 5 Averaged 3.9 of 5	Added mentor training No changes; met Changed benchmark (grads too "humble") No changes; met (alum noted "humility") Appointed faculty task force to review
4. Graduates will ...	NOTE: This outcome has been deleted for the sake of brevity.			

* The assessment results listed here are simplified samples. An actual assessment report should specify the time period covered (e.g., 2014 graduates), as well as give some indication of the total population (e.g., 15 total graduates from 2014) and the number/percentage of those providing assessment data (e.g., data from 12 of 15 were collected), and any sampling methods used (e.g., random sample). For more discussion, see the third point in Appendix 2.

Sample 2: Assessment Results Summary for an MDiv Narrative Outline Format

Outcome 1: MDiv graduates will demonstrate appropriate skills in interpreting Scripture.*

Outcome Measures Used

1. Direct Measure: Exegesis paper from MDiv portfolio.
2. Direct Measure: Capstone research project, scored using faculty-wide rubric developed last year.
3. Indirect Measure: ATS's Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) on Table 13, which has two relevant questions regarding how well students feel prepared to use and interpret Scripture, and preach well.
4. Indirect Measure: Course evaluation forms for all biblical courses averaged over time, using a rolling average of the last five years (the average time to complete an MDiv).
5. Indirect Measure: Exit interviews from MDiv graduates.

Criteria for Success

[NOTE: "Criteria for Success" = "Performance Indicator" or "Benchmark"]

1. Average score of "acceptable" on rubric for exegetical paper in MDiv portfolio, with the added goal of having at least one-fifth (20%) achieve an "exceptional" rating.
2. Average score of 3 ("acceptable") out of 4 on the capstone project rubric for all MDiv grads, which includes the ability to interpret and apply two different texts in case studies.
3. 80 percent of graduating students taking the GSQ will report a score of 4.0 or above (out of 5)
4. 75 percent of all students will rate their Bible courses at 4.0 or above (out of 5), using the internally developed course evaluation form in use over the last 10 years.
5. A random sample of exit interviews will generally be positive, with affirmations and helpful suggestions far outweighing concerns or complaints.

Assessment Results

1. MDiv grads averaged above "acceptable" on rubric for this artifact in the MDiv portfolio, with 30 percent scored at the "excellent" level.
2. MDiv grads averaged 3.5 on capstone rubric; 1 of 20 grads rated 1.0 (unacceptable), with that one student viewed as an "outlier."
3. 95 percent of MDiv grads have self-rated score of 4 or above on those questions, with 4.35 as the average, based on results from last year (GSQ is used every other year).
4. 73 percent of all students rated their bible courses at 4.0 or above (with 22% rating below 3.0), with an average response rate of only 58 percent over the last five years.
5. Appendix A provides a summary of student comments from last year's MDiv exit interviews, with comments providing strong affirmation of this outcome.

Assessment Changes

1. Faculty discussed this at length and concluded that this is a strong area for our MDiv grads; they also recommended that the rubric (introduced three years ago) be revised with clearer criteria.
2. Faculty also felt the data indicate that students do well in achieving the MDiv program's first outcome on interpreting Scripture; the failure of one student to score an acceptable rating on the capstone was indicative of larger issues with this student, who has since been counseled out of the MDiv program.
3. The 95 percent rating reinforces the faculty's sense of this outcome as a strength of the program, though two of the current five faculty in Bible plan to retire in two years, creating some concern.
4. The failure to achieve this benchmark was a subject of much faculty discussion, with various reasons given. While the benchmark was almost met, the low rating by more than one-fifth of the students (22%) merits further discussion. A faculty task force was appointed by the dean last fall to bring back recommendations.
5. Student testimonials were very encouraging and quite positive, so no changes are anticipated.

*NOTE: Only one MDiv outcome listed here for sake of space, but all MDiv degree programs must address the four program content areas described in Degree Program Standard A, section A.2.

Appendix 2

Excursus on Quantitative Data

In Chapter 5 (5.b), we discuss the use of quantitative and qualitative data. It may be helpful here to say a few more words about numbers.

First, schools often wonder how big a number they need to have adequate assessment results. Some might argue, for example, that since they graduate only a handful of students each year, then that number is too small to yield meaningful assessment results. In reality, small numbers mean a school can evaluate the entire population and not have to rely on a sample. Assessing what all five of your graduates have learned is just as meaningful, if not more so, than assessing what 25 of 30 graduates have learned. However, small numbers can also present a challenge for some schools. For example, a school assessing a group of only a few graduates might rightly be concerned that the data from one person could significantly skew the results. In such cases, several options are possible: (1) report only frequencies, not averages (e.g., four students ranked this outcome at 4.5 out of 5, while one ranked it at 3.0); (2) aggregate several groups of graduates so the results from just one person won't be so dramatic; and/or (3) report the results from the small group, but note in the report that one student represented results significantly different from all the others (a "statistical outlier").

Second (and conversely), that does not mean that schools with large numbers of students have to assess every student every year in every area. Smaller samples of larger numbers can be a very efficient and equally effective way to conduct assessment—as long as you make sure that the sampling is legitimate. For example, a school might choose to have faculty review 10 out of 30 student assignments as an indicator of how that assignment achieved a specific student learning outcome for a specific degree program. Evaluating just 10 out of 30 (or 5 out of 12; there is no required ratio) is perfectly legitimate as long as those samples are not inappropriately chosen, such as choosing assignments only from known "A" students. It is also a good practice to use a random or representative sample where the identities of the students are not disclosed to the reviewers. The Standards expect schools to "guard the confidentiality of student work used in the assessment of student learning and, as necessary, provide for the anonymity of student identity in certain artifacts of their work" (ES.6.3.)

Third, if a school samples a larger audience or reports responses from less than the entire population of those being assessed, it is always best to give some indication of the total population, the sample size, the response rate, and/or the sampling method. For example, 75 percent of our 40 graduates last year indicated . . . Or, our faculty reviewed 10 out of 30 exegetical artifacts, chosen randomly. Or, among the 50 alumni/ae surveyed, only 15 (30%) responded, indicating that the results may not be representative of our graduates as a whole. And if a school is reporting on the whole population, it is still helpful to indicate the total number. For example, to report that 25 percent of our graduates "failed to meet expectations" (using the rubric for outcome X) may mean that 25 students "failed"—if

the total population is 100; but it may mean that only one student “failed”—if the total population is only four. Those results suggest two rather different responses.

Fourth, when reporting numeric assessment data, it is common to use simple descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, median, mode, frequency, etc.), not more sophisticated inferential statistics (Chi-square or t-tests, linear regression analysis, etc.). Anything more than simple descriptive statistics is usually not necessary. While there are some formulae proposed in statistical studies (e.g., for random sampling or size of sample), such sophisticated methods tend to be beyond the scope of most schools of theology. That is one reason why schools should usually report numeric data in not unduly specific ways (e.g., 77%, not 76.85% or 4.5 out of 5, not 4.475 out of 5). Rarely does the size of the populations represented among member schools merit anything more specific. Using overly specific numbers seems to imply that there is a significant difference between, say, a score of 4.497 and 4.505, when rarely there is.

Appendix 3

Excursus on Rubrics

In Chapter 5 (5.b), we discuss the value of rubrics. Some rubrics are used for specific course-imbedded assessments (e.g., exegesis paper) in order to bring greater clarity and consistency to their assessment. Other rubrics are used for assessing artifacts that are not linked to a particular course or assignment but are more broadly focused on overall student achievement in a degree program (e.g., capstone project or thesis). This appendix provides some further discussion and gives a few examples of both.

One of the values of using rubrics for specific course-imbedded assessments is to provide consistency and to combat the criticism of the arbitrariness of course grades. For example, if a professor grades a group of five papers and gives one A, three Bs, and one C using a well-developed grading rubric for that paper, then any other qualified personnel using the same grading rubric should assign virtually the same grades. A well-developed grading rubric helps ensure that any differences in grading are the result of student learning, not faculty arbitrariness. An additional advantage of grading rubrics is that students clearly know what is expected of them. If they do not meet appropriate criteria, then they know why and what they must do to improve—an important goal in assessment. Such rubrics can also save faculty time because they are not writing the same comment over and over again on dozens of different assignments.

It is worth noting at this point that rubrics, like assessment, should be simple. Effective rubrics typically have at most only three or four levels, such as excellent, acceptable, needs improvement, and/or unacceptable. They also should provide clear criteria for how one determines why something receives the score that it does. Elaborate 10-point scales that we see with some rubrics tend to make the process overly cumbersome and difficult to implement. Here are two examples of rubrics that are simple and clearly define the criteria by which the outcome is evaluated.

Sample Rubric for Thesis			
Outcome	Excellent (3.0)	Acceptable (2.0)	Needs Improvement (1.0)
Demonstrates appropriate writing skills	Has clear thesis, material is organized very well, no grammatical errors, presents more than one side of an argument	Has fairly clear thesis, material is organized, minimal grammatical errors, sometimes presents only one side	Thesis not clear or lacking, material poorly organized, many grammatical errors, presents only one side of an argument
Demonstrates graduate-level research skills	Uses at least 75 resources, resources represent best scholarship, resources are used professionally, resources are formatted consistently	Uses at least 50 resources, resources represent good scholarship, resources are used unevenly, resources sometimes not formatted consistently	Uses fewer than 20 resources, resources not from reputable sources, resources rarely cited, resources not formatted consistently
NOTE: A thesis will clearly have many other outcomes; these two are simply illustrative.			

Sample Rubric for Sermon			
Outcome	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Does Not Meet Expectations
Grasps the attention of the audience from the outset	Memorable opening line that captures attention and sets up the topic/text	Clear opening line that fits well with sermon	Lacks memorable or clear opening; just starts with text or topic
States clearly the “big idea” of the sermon	Key point(s) of sermon are clear and easy to remember	Key point(s) of sermon is(are) fairly clear	Not clear what sermon is about
Demonstrates sound exegesis of appropriate text(s)	Uses Scripture well with clear and compelling interpretations	Interprets Scripture fairly, but with little explanation	Paid only “lip service” to Scripture with no explanation or interpretation
Uses language and illustrations appropriate to audience	Spoke clearly and correctly with powerful illustrations to make his or her point(s)	Spoke fairly clearly with only a few grammatical mistakes; used only a few illustrations	Was hard to understand, with numerous grammatical mistakes; very few, if any, illustrations.
NOTE: A sermon may have other outcomes; these four are simply illustrative.			

When used for degree program assessment, rubrics for a single course-embedded assignment should focus attention on the desired goals or outcomes of the program as much as possible. For example, a C paper may be poorly written but still demonstrate a student’s proficiency with exegesis; a B paper may be beautifully written but be lacking as far as the goal or outcome is concerned. This is another reason why course assignments and course grades, alone, are sometimes limited in their ability to serve the degree program assessment process.

For further information about developing rubrics, one could conduct a simple search on the Internet under “college-level grading rubrics” (“grading rubrics” alone will yield mostly results for elementary or secondary schools). Or more specifically, one could search under “rubrics for theology,” which yields some helpful examples, including some from ATS member schools. One could also visit the website for the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, which has an especially helpful guide for developing clear and concise rubrics.

We also call your attention to an assessment project being developed by the National Catholic Educational Association, with support from ATS. That project, still in process in 2014, focuses especially on using rubrics to assess the MDiv degree program in the context of the four pillars described in the Program for Priestly Formation for Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States.