

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK

(updated September 2023)



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

**ATS Commission on Accrediting
Board of Commissioners**

Self-Study Handbook
(September 2023 edition)

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INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is a primary means of attending to quality assurance, as well as a significant resource for quality improvement. Historically, accreditation in North American higher education has been a voluntary activity in which schools agree on standards of educational quality and then hold themselves mutually accountable to those standards. To do this, schools form accrediting associations and adopt standards and policies by which these 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 peer reviewers (from other accredited schools and from other religious or professional organizations) visits the school to evaluate the school and prepares a narrative report with recommendations to the accrediting decision-making body; and (3) the accrediting body considers reports from the schools and review committees and makes decisions about the accredited status of the schools. Accreditation, at its core, is the practice by which schools hold themselves accountable—to each other, to communities of faith, and to the broader public—in ways that are based on mutual understandings of educational and institutional quality.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

As a membership organization, the mission of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada is “to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public” (*ATS website*). The purpose of the Commission on Accrediting is to “contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools” (*Commission Bylaws*, 1.2). Since 1936, the ATS Commission on Accrediting has maintained standards for its member schools. These standards are developed and approved by the membership with a focus on how they can help member schools improve in educational quality. In North America, the underlying meaning of accreditation has taken four forms since ATS (and later, its Commission on Accrediting) began accrediting theological schools in the 1930s.

Under the first *Standards of Accreditation*, schools were evaluated in terms of their resources, and thus accredited 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 emerged in the 1970s as ATS membership became increasingly diverse (particularly as Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant schools sought accreditation, as degree programs multiplied, and as student bodies became more diverse). ATS accreditation added a new question to its historical one about resources: Are the resources appropriate to the educational programs and goals of the school? 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.

A third historical moment emerged in the 1990s, when accrediting standards began to ask more

explicit questions about evaluation and emphasized the importance of institutional and educational effectiveness. Schools had to demonstrate how they were accomplishing the goals that the school had established for its educational programs. To be accredited then meant that a theological school had resources appropriate to graduate theological education in general, that its resources were appropriate to the school's particular mission and educational programs, *and* that it was able to demonstrate the extent to which its educational and institutional goals were being achieved.

A fourth, more recent movement is reflected in the current standards, adopted by the membership in June 2020. These standards emphasize a return to first principles: why does this school exist and in what ways does it contribute in its context to the betterment of faith communities and society. These principles are listed in the following section and give special emphasis to student learning and formation. The standards reflect agreed-upon educational principles that help each member school better achieve its distinctive educational mission in light of its particular context. They assure the public of each school's educational quality, based on the professional judgment of peer and public members. They also foster flexibility and innovation. In all these ways, the standards help schools embody their missions, grow in light of their missions, and be transparent about their missions.

Accreditation by the ATS Commission on Accrediting, during each of these four historical moments, has been based on standards adopted by the community of theological schools, thus reflecting a shared wisdom regarding quality in graduate theological education. Within each definition of quality contained in these 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 school. Beyond this, however, the standards also affirm that all schools have the need and desire for ongoing growth, and that practices of self-study, peer review, and mutual accountability can foster learning and encourage improvement. Thus, accreditation allows both for *quality assurance* and *quality improvement*. The perception of quality contained in the current *Standards of Accreditation* was constructed by a collaborative process, designed by and in service to a wide range of schools that relate to a broad range of religious communities in North America and around the globe, 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.

Because the purposes of Commission accreditation are to ensure standards of quality and to facilitate the improvement of theological schools, the benefits of accreditation serve a variety of stakeholders, including the accredited schools, their internal constituencies, and their external constituencies. 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 actions of the Board of Commissioners. 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. Schools also benefit from their accreditation when other agencies or institutions make judgments about a school on the basis of its accredited status, including that the Commission is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation

(CHEA), by the US Department of Education (USDE), and by some Canadian provinces as an “external accreditor” for purposes of quality assurance. Students benefit from their school’s accreditation because work completed at accredited schools is more easily transferred to other schools (although acceptance of transfer credit is always the decision of individual schools), because degrees from Commission-accredited schools may be recommended or required for ordination or employment, and because accreditation helps ensure the academic and professional integrity of the degrees they earn.

Accreditation helps schools improve – not simply for their own sake, but primarily for the benefit of others, including the religious institutions and other communities who serve and are served by the alumni/ae of ATS schools. For example, accreditation serves denominations and other constituencies by ensuring the quality of graduate theological degrees and affirms to donors and other stakeholders that the school is engaged in appropriate educational efforts. Accreditation also benefits a wider public, which is often uninformed about theological schools, by providing assurance that the schools in their communities are responsible members of the higher education community. Because accreditation seeks to benefit schools, 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 society as a whole.

EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES

As noted above, the current Commission standards emphasize a return to first principles: why does the school exist and in what ways does it contribute in its context to the betterment of faith communities and society. The standards articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the ATS membership over many decades, while also attending to the diversity and variety of our schools today. As such, the standards reflect agreed-upon educational principles, with illustrative practices, that help each member school better achieve its distinctive educational mission in light of its particular context. They assure the public of each school’s educational quality – based on the professional judgment of peer and public members. They also foster flexibility and innovation. In all these ways, these standards help schools embody their missions, grow in light of their missions, and be transparent about their missions.

The following ten principles do not have a one-to-one correlation with the ten Commission *Standards* since some principles relate to several standards and some standards relate to several principles. Rather, these principles provide a broad basis for better understanding the standards and also articulate key commitments of the standards. Like the Commission standards, these principles use some terms that are intentionally not defined, given the diversity of the membership. For example, not all schools define formation or diversity the same way, but all schools must attend to formation and diversity in light of their distinctive missions and contexts. These principles are not ranked or ordered, although all flow from the mission and commitments of The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting (see Preamble to the *Standards*). The word “graduate” in each statement below indicates that these principles are focused on the work of our members schools engaged in graduate, professional theological

education, while recognizing that quality theological education is not limited to our schools or those modes of theological education.

The ten educational principles are these:

1. *Theological education is rooted in theological values.* Graduate theological education embodies a community of faith and learning that is guided by a theological vision and that cultivates habits of theological reflection and service.
2. *Theological education prioritizes student learning and formation.* Graduate theological education demonstrates sound pedagogy and appropriate student learning outcomes in the context of a cohesive curriculum, and sees formation, even transformation, as central to students' educational experience and to their vocational calling.
3. *Theological education requires communities of engagement.* Graduate theological education occurs within the context of regular and substantive interaction between teachers and learners and among learners within a viable community of learning, with "teachers" understood to include faculty, librarians, administrators, staff, and other appropriate stakeholders.
4. *Theological education is contextually appropriate.* Graduate theological education attends carefully to the contexts, communities, and constituencies in which, and for which, it is offered, and responds to changing contexts with creativity and innovation.
5. *Theological education demonstrates diversity.* Graduate theological education values and demonstrates diversity in its many manifestations, including attention to intercultural competencies, global awareness and engagement, and underrepresented and marginalized groups.
6. *Theological education has appropriate institutional resources and support.* Graduate theological education demonstrates careful planning, sound budgeting, and good stewardship, with attention to the school's financial, physical, technological, and library and information needs.
7. *Theological education requires sufficient and appropriate personnel.* Graduate theological education is highly relational, requiring enough faculty and staff who are appropriately qualified for and supported in their work and who provide support to students.
8. *Theological education requires a healthy institutional environment.* Graduate theological education depends on shared governance based on a bond of trust among boards, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and ecclesial or denominational bodies; it requires clear grounding in its mission and vision and effective patterns of leadership and management.
9. *Theological education demonstrates careful institutional planning and evaluation.* Graduate theological education builds from a clear sense of purpose, is undertaken through intentional processes of planning, is enacted through careful instructional and organizational design, and is evaluated in light of the mission and context of each school.
10. *Theological education depends upon integrity, trust, and mutual accountability.* Graduate theological education is offered by schools that act with integrity and trust, are committed to freedom of inquiry, and hold themselves accountable—to each other, to communities of faith, and to the broader public—for their quality, transparency, and authenticity.

Commission accreditation is grounded in these ten educational principles. It is expressed and interpreted by the *Standards of Accreditation* (“Standards”) and *Commission Policies* (“Policies”) that have been adopted by the Commission’s membership. It is supported by documents prepared by the ATS Board of Commissioners, including the *Board Procedures*, various Board guidelines and related documents, and this *Self-Study Handbook*. The Commission makes a variety of educational and interpretive resources available to assist member schools, including workshops and online training resources, and each school is assigned a Commission staff liaison to support it in its work. For further information on the Board of Commissioners or on the processes of achieving and maintaining accreditation, see the materials available on the Commission’s website (www.ats.edu).

OVERVIEW OF THE HANDBOOK

As a school approaches a comprehensive evaluation for reaffirmation or for initial accreditation, it can be helpful to think in terms of three distinct (but mutually informing) phases: (1) the self-study process, (2) the self-study report, and (3) the self-study visit. This handbook focuses on each of those three phases in turn, giving attention both to broad themes and to specific practices. Given the diversity of contexts represented in ATS schools (e.g., in size, structure, resources, programs, location, and so on), schools are encouraged to seek consultation early and often with their Commission staff liaison, and to draw on other Commission resources as appropriate, to help them design a self-study process that meets the expectations of the Commission while also serving in ways that are authentic, meaningful, and helpful to the school. Self-study is a significant investment—of time, resources, energy, and money—and schools regularly indicate that self-study is most beneficial when the school is intentional about being a wise steward of these resources. In particular, while schools must give attention to the entirety of the Commission *Standards*, as well as to the full breadth of the self-study process, schools are also encouraged to consider ways to simplify and streamline their work so that they may focus their resources on aspects of the self-study that may be especially useful, timely, and meaningful to the school and to the communities it serves.

At its heart, self-study is an opportunity for significant conversations and imagination, for broad and deep introspection and self-evaluation, and for meaningful feedback from peers; it is not intended to be a bureaucratic task or an exercise in demonstrating compliance. Self-study allows schools to celebrate their strengths, name areas for growth, and prioritize and plan future actions. As each school charts its own path through the self-study process, it is encouraged to keep in mind the overarching purpose of accreditation—including its voluntary nature and its dual attention to both quality assurance and quality improvement—and to remember that, as a school engaging in this process, you are a member of ATS, and so these standards are “your” standards (as the standards always come from the membership, are approved and adopted by the membership, and are interpreted by the membership). Those who have engaged in this process before you deeply believe that it can enliven and enhance each school’s own mission and purpose, while also serving an important role in assuring quality and improving graduate theological education across North America. May it be so for you as well.

PART ONE: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

Accreditation processes, including those of the ATS Commission on Accrediting, have always emphasized organizational self-evaluation as a crucial element in accreditation. More recently, self-study also provides an opportunity to focus on student learning and formation—on those whom the organization serves most directly. Through a process of self-study, a school 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 in light of the school’s own purpose and goals, especially regarding student learning and formation. The self-study process allows a school to evaluate how it is implementing the expectations of the standards, to identify how it can improve, and to feed this learning into organizational planning and ongoing evaluation. The self-study process, and the resulting report, should be candid and focused so that it can be thoughtfully informative for the school, for the evaluation committee, and for the Board of Commissioners, as well as for students and those whom they serve.

For most schools, the self-study process begins two years prior to the scheduled comprehensive evaluation visit, when schools are invited to attend the Commission’s Self-Study Workshop at the ATS office in Pittsburgh. Any school that is not able to attend the workshop is encouraged to schedule a conversation with their Commission staff liaison—during the same semester as the workshop, at the latest—so that the school can be oriented to this important work and to the resources provided by the Commission.

GOALS FOR THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

The self-study process should serve many purposes, including these two key elements: (1) internal evaluation and planning and (2) preparation for external review. While it culminates in the self-study report, self-study is an occasion where process is just as important as outcome, and where the report itself ought not be the only identified outcome. Schools are encouraged to design a self-study process that is useful and meaningful in and of itself, not only so that it culminates with an effective report, but also so that the school has the opportunity to engage in practices of evaluation, planning, and review in holistic ways that enhance the mission and ongoing work of the school.

Internal evaluation and planning

The self-study is a process by which the various constituencies of a school can evaluate its efforts to enhance its practices and programs, with a particular focus on student learning and formation. Good evaluation involves not only collecting and analyzing information but also making judgments about particular educational or institutional activities and then implementing change (“closing the loop”) based on these judgements. While schools engage in various types of evaluation all the time (course evaluations, personnel evaluations, program evaluations, and so on), the self-study process is unique because it invites the school to review the entirety of its

work at once and to involve a much wider range of stakeholders than usual, all for the sake of the effectiveness of achieving the mission of the school.

In the context of self-study—as well as more broadly (see Standards 2.5-8)—evaluation can be understood as a four-fold process whereby a school:

- identifies key educational and institutional outcomes (including learning outcomes for each degree program),
- systematically and regularly gathers evidence related to each outcome (with a mixture of direct and indirect measures and quantitative and qualitative data),
- engages appropriate stakeholders (especially faculty for educational outcomes) on a sustained basis to analyze and reflect upon how well the evidence indicates that each educational and institutional outcome is being achieved, and
- uses those analyses and reflections for educational and institutional improvement.

In the first step, the self-study is an appropriate time to **review the school's desired outcomes** in areas addressed by the *Standards*. This review involves two evaluative tasks. The first asks a normative question: *Are these outcomes 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 as 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 outcomes the right ones for this school, at this particular point in its history, in the context of the issues confronting the particular communities it serves, and in light of the school's broader mission and purpose?* In many schools, substantive discussions should occur in self-study subcommittees about the value of presently articulated outcomes and the need for revised ones.

Second, the school needs to **identify the kinds of information and evidence** it needs in order to evaluate the achievement of those outcomes, especially those related to student learning and formation. Accredited schools already have numerous systems of information-gathering in place and, in the context of the self-study, should review comprehensively the evidence that has been collected. This may involve questions like: *Is the right kind of information being collected, and is it collected in usable forms?* and *Does the school use the information effectively in the evaluation process?* When gaps are identified, the self-study might focus on questions like: *What kinds of new information should be collected?* and *What systems will be necessary for collecting this information in a consistent and ongoing fashion?*

The third step is the task of **analyzing and interpreting the evidence** that has been collected. This step involves the question: *To what extent, and in what ways, have the outcomes been achieved?* Information alone, no matter how rich or sophisticated, cannot answer this question. The important outcomes in theological education are complex and require judgment and reflection based on patterns of information, in light of the school's own context. Intentionality and care should be given to discerning not only *whether* a school is achieving its outcomes but also *how well* it is doing so and where there might be room for improvement (as defined by the school, in light of the Commission *Standards*). During the self-study process, particular attention should be given to the student learning outcomes for each degree program, as well as to the

overall ways in which the school is accomplishing its mission and purpose; individual outcomes should be analyzed in light of those larger ends.

Given the emphasis of the Commission *Standards* on educational principles and to contextualized accountability more generally, a school should give particular attention during this third step to exploring and evaluating how its educational and institutional practices embody the Commission's principles of quality. As part of this, the school should examine and make a case for what it sees as "appropriate" outcomes (step one) and how it gathers evidence (step two) and analyzes that evidence (step three) to demonstrate that it is meeting these outcomes appropriately, in light of both its own context and the Commission *Standards*.

The final phase of the evaluation process involves ***using these analyses for educational and organizational improvement***. In the context of the self-study, this typically takes four forms. First, there should be many instances where the evaluation process confirms that the school is achieving its outcomes, and those are strengths to be celebrated. Second, the evaluation process may lead the school to determine that certain outcomes are no longer appropriate, useful, or sufficient. In these cases, the school would take action to develop revised goals or new outcomes. Third, there may be instances where, in spite of its best efforts, the school will realize that it does not have sufficient information or evidence to determine that an outcome is being met. In these cases, the school would develop a plan to collect or create new sources of evidence that can be used in ongoing evaluation. Fourth and finally, there may be instances where the school discovers that a meaningful outcome has not been achieved. In these cases, attention turns to articulating a plan for improvement, including the timeline for implementation and the process for evaluating whether the intervention has been successful.

Not surprisingly, strategic planning flows naturally from evaluation and becomes a process by which schools formalize the use of evaluation results to improve their work. It involves making decisions about what new activities should be undertaken and what activities should be discontinued in order to apply resources to other activities. It also involves discerning 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 school to review and revise its strategic plans and to attend to its educational quality and financial vitality. It can also be an occasion to develop a new strategic plan, based on what the self-study process reveals.

Preparation for external review

Although the process of self-study serves valuable internal purposes, one of the important benefits of Commission accreditation is that it enables schools to engage in evaluation as part of a larger community of graduate theological schools. As noted in the Preamble to the *Standards of Accreditation*,

Accreditation is about quality assurance for various publics and ongoing improvement for theological schools, especially regarding student learning and formation. It is a voluntary process through which schools mutually assure one another's educational quality with an eye toward ongoing improvement, based on standards. Through self-review, a school has regular opportunities to reflect intentionally on its distinctive strengths and its areas of

desired growth in light of its unique mission and distinct context and in light of the standards. Self-review then supports the school's efforts in planning, evaluation, and imagination. Through peer review, an accredited school is endorsed by its peers as one of quality and integrity, which affirms the school's value to society, as well as its trustworthiness.

As this quotation indicates, engagement with the larger community of graduate schools takes two important forms. First, the Commission *Standards* themselves serve as an expression of the shared wisdom of the ATS membership regarding important principles for quality theological education. Schools are asked to evaluate themselves, not only on the basis of their own mission and purpose, but also in relation to these shared standards. Thus, when schools are engaging in the self-study process, they want to do so not in isolation but as part of an ongoing conversation and interaction with a wider lens and broader audience. Concretely, this takes the form of a self-evaluation process that is grounded in the Commission *Standards*, and where "effectiveness" is determined not only in light of the school's own goals and outcomes but also the shared wisdom of member schools.

Second, self-evaluation can provide an occasion for a school to compare its outcomes to those of other institutions—not for the sake of ranking or justification of value, but to better understand how and where it fits in the larger ecology of graduate theological education. For example, a school might find it helpful to consider its retention patterns, tuition charges, program offerings, or student satisfaction results in light of those of peer schools. It can also engage in problem-solving with and learn from other member schools. For example, as a school discovers a weakness in a program, policy, or evaluation strategy, it can reach out to other schools to discover how they have addressed similar issues. Furthermore, as the school moves through the self-study process and engages in issues related to accreditation more generally, it can draw on ATS staff and other ATS resources as the embodiment of the collective wisdom of the membership. In all of these ways, the important work of self-evaluation is not and ought not be done in isolation but rather as an expression of an ongoing commitment to and connection with the larger contexts of graduate theological education in North America and around the world.

Beyond this, the work of self-study is intended to culminate in a report that is useful not only to the school itself but also as the primary means by which the school presents itself for external review. The report should give the peer evaluation committee a good description of the school and the ways in which it gathers and organizes appropriate information, goes about its evaluation based on that information, and uses the findings of its evaluative efforts in institutional planning and educational programming. 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 a school and its programs according to the *Standards* is insufficient. In particular, given the Commission's focus on principles of quality (rather than predetermined practices) and on contextualized accountability, the self-study should give clear attention to how it will help external audiences see and understand that a school is embodying educational quality through its own mission and context. With this end in mind, the school should design a self-study process that has the goal of informing and serving outside peers, not just internal audiences.

Schools 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. In addition, many schools have found that focusing on the external audience of peer reviewers actually serves to inform and enhance internal audiences as well, whether by asking questions that the school does not typically think to ask (e.g., *why do we do what we do, does our mission serve our stakeholders and align with our practices, how well is our intuitive sense of ourselves supported by evidence*) or by bringing certain internal stakeholders (trustees, alumni, donors, denominational leaders, university representatives) more fully into current conversations about the school's strengths, gifts, challenges, and opportunities.

ORGANIZING FOR THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

As many schools know, the self-study process can be complicated and has sometimes been perceived as onerous, particularly by schools who have more than one accrediting agency or other authoritative bodies to whom they are accountable. Some have felt that the self-study process took them away from mission-critical tasks or distracted them from key priorities and responsibilities, or that it was not worth the significant effort. However, just as schools have learned that good educational evaluation can (and should) be simple, systematic, and sustained, schools have also learned that it is possible (and even essential) to develop strategies for institutional evaluation (including comprehensive self-study) that are scalable and appropriate to the context (including the size) of the school, that are not unnecessarily complicated, that are regularly and consistently implemented, and that enable a school to understand that institutional self-evaluation is helping it live more fully into its mission. At its best, self-study should be an experience of curiosity, of asking what a school values and how well it is living into its values, and of exploring what it wants to be and what it takes to get (or stay) there. All of this requires thoughtful and careful design, even as it also requires space for spontaneity, learning, surprise, and experimentation.

Before selecting an organizational structure for the self-study process, a school might begin by reading together the *Standards* as a whole, and then engaging in conversation and discernment about the school's own hopes and goals for the self-study. This may help a school identify where it best wants to align its energies, as well as how it will understand whether the process has been successful. For example, while giving broad attention to the comprehensive self-study process, a school might also choose to give focused attention to one or more issues of significant interest to the school, whether those are ones that are timely, or that have been neglected, or that hold the most potential. A school might use the self-study as an occasion to dive deeply into its strategic planning process, or to discern new long-range goals, or to clarify what is most distinctive about its mission, or to reflect back on a season of change, or to engage in appreciative inquiry and comprehensive review apart from any experience of crisis or transition.

Once a school articulates its own goals and purpose for self-study, it will be easier to identify which stakeholders should be most centrally involved, which resources should be committed to this project, and what sources of information will be most helpful in the school's evaluative

work. Schools are also encouraged to:

- take an inventory of their current evaluation processes and structures,
- build on reports they have written for other agencies,
- use data they have collected for other projects,
- draw on existing committee structures that might easily take on some of the specific work of the self-study process, and
- consider other ways in which this project can be scaled to fit the size and context of the school.

All of this will help a school recognize and strategize how it will invest its time, people, and other resources in the self-study process, and (for schools that are also accountable to other accrediting agencies) may allow it to focus even more closely on the distinctive features of Commission accreditation in light of the mission and context of the school.

Schools that are accredited by more than one body might consider ways to design the self-study process in ways that serve multiple ends. For example, a school might name a single steering committee to oversee more than one accrediting process, with a separate director or editor focusing explicitly on the Commission *Standards* and the Commission style of accreditation and another who focuses on the standards and expectations of the other body. Subcommittees on certain topics might address more than one set of standards (e.g., most agencies have a standard about mission or about planning and evaluation), discuss broad themes and review evidence of how the school meets its goals and desired outcomes, then write two texts, one focused on the expectations of each body. If a school has recently engaged in an accrediting or quality assurance process for another body, it might look at how it can draw on those learnings to support its Commission self-study.

Regardless of how a school designs its process, it should remember that it will need to prepare a self-study report that focuses explicitly on the Commission *Standards* and that follows the organizational structure described in part two of this handbook. Schools with dual accreditation should note that neither joint visits (one committee representing two agencies) nor coordinated visits (two committees that meet jointly for some interviews) are allowed, in part because each agency must come to separate and independent judgements (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.1). The school may choose to consider a concurrent evaluation visit, where two separate evaluation committees visit the school at the same time but hold separate interviews, have distinct meeting and workspace, and come to all decisions independently. Schools considering concurrent visits are urged to consult with Commission staff early in the planning process as a coordinated visit will need to be approved by Commission staff. The school may also find it helpful to talk with other schools that have engaged in concurrent visits to learn from their experiences.

More generally, it is important to note that there is no single “correct” design for the task of comprehensive self-study. Any structure or process that accomplishes the work effectively and enables the school to achieve the purposes of the self-study described above is appropriate. In whatever way the study is structured, it should evaluate the school and its programs in light of the entirety of the Commission *Standards*, remembering that the self-study process should be widely participatory and that the resulting report should be designed to benefit both internal and

external readers. The following sections offer some suggestions and possibilities for organizational structures. Schools are also encouraged to consult with their Commission staff liaison, and with peer schools, to explore contextually appropriate models that will help them achieve beneficial outcomes from this important work.

Steering committee

Regardless of structure, the work of self-study is almost always done by a steering committee and several subcommittees (preexisting or new). The steering committee guides the self-study by designing and supervising the self-study process and by ensuring the development of the culminating self-study report. The steering committee should be widely representative of the constituencies that compose the school, and often includes faculty, administration, staff, students, trustees, and other stakeholders as appropriate to the mission and context of the school (e.g., alumni/ae, denominational partners, university representatives). The steering committee is responsible to:

1. Initiate the self-study process by developing its design, organizing the subcommittee structure, engaging community members to promote institutional buy-in, developing assignments for each subcommittee, and determining the timeline and schedule for the self-study.
2. Oversee the self-study process through activities such as designing opportunities for community-wide conversations and fellowship, monitoring the progress of the subcommittees, and providing support for their work as appropriate, addressing broad themes and issues that overlap more than one subcommittee, and gathering and reviewing subcommittee reports.
3. Develop processes and timelines for review, revision, and approval of the final report, including opportunities for constituencies to give input into the proposals and recommendations generated by the self-study and for the school's governing body (or designee) to formally receive the final report prior to its submission to the Board of Commissioners.
4. Assist with the development of a plan for follow-up and implementation of the self-study recommendations, the report and recommendations of the evaluation committee, and the final action letter of the Board of Commissioners.

The steering committee might begin its work by reading together the Commission *Standards* (including the Preamble) as well as this handbook, so that its work can begin with the end in mind. It will also want to review the school's accreditation history and the previous evaluation committee report to ensure that the self-study addresses concerns raised in the previous comprehensive evaluation as well as any accreditation-related issues that have emerged since that last review. More generally, the steering committee will want to consider ways in which the school can utilize this opportunity not only to demonstrate how well it lives into the Commission *Standards* but also to name distinctive strengths, address current challenges, and imagine new possibilities for the school. To this end, the steering committee might start by discussing its best hopes for the self-study process and then explore ways in which it might bring these dreams to fruition.

Subcommittees

Much of the technical work of the self-study process is completed by subcommittees that are assigned to work in specific areas related to the Commission *Standards*. 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; subcommittees are encouraged to read the *Standards* as a whole before beginning work on the sections assigned to them. Working from the specific charge or task assignment prepared by the steering committee, each subcommittee is responsible for evaluating those aspects of the school related to the standards assigned to it. It does this by (1) reviewing the goals or purposes related to its area of study; (2) identifying the evidence that can inform its evaluation; (3) evaluating the extent to which the school is accomplishing its purposes or goals with regard to the subcommittee's particular area of study; and (4) developing recommendations regarding revising goals and desired outcomes, revising strategies for collecting evidence, or engaging in practices that will lead to organizational or educational improvement.

The number of subcommittees will depend both on the design of the self-study and on the size and context of the school. A school will need to decide if some self-study tasks should be added to the work of existing committees (such as a curriculum committee or admissions committee) or if all work should be done by new subcommittees specifically for the self-study. Although the Board of Commissioners does not recommend any particular structure, the *Standards* lend themselves to being considered in the following ways:

For smaller 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 subcommittees:

1. Standards 1 (Mission and Integrity), 2 (Planning and Evaluation), 9 (Governance and Administration), and 10 (Institutional Resources), as standards that focus on broad institutional concerns in support of the school's mission.
2. Standards 3 (Student Learning and Formation), 4 (Master's Degree Programs), and 5 (Doctoral Degree Programs), as standards that focus most directly on student learning and formation.
3. Standards 6 (Library and Information Services), 7 (Student Services), and 8 (Faculty), as standards that focus on programs and personnel that support students most directly.

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 more subcommittees.

1. Standards 1 (Mission and Integrity) and 2 (Planning and Evaluation)
2. Standards 3 (Student Learning and Formation) and 4 (Master's Degree Programs)
3. Standards 5 (Doctoral Degree Programs) and 8 (Faculty)
4. Standards 6 (Library and Information Services) and 7 (Student Services)
5. Standards 9 (Governance and Administration) and 10 (Institutional Resources)

Schools with numerous degree programs might further subdivide the work of Standard 4 (Master's Degree Programs) or Standard 5 (Doctoral Degree Programs). Embedded schools

might design subcommittee structures that draw on the resources of the larger body, while also giving focused attention to the work of the theological school and the distinctive features of ATS Commission accreditation. Some large schools might choose to name a separate subcommittee for each of the ten standards. Schools might also consider developing working groups within subcommittees to give particular attention to certain sections of the *Standards*, particularly those that the school identifies as crucial for their own situation and context.

As schools think about subcommittee membership, it is often helpful to include both individuals who will bring expertise and experience regarding the standard(s) being studied, and also those who can bring a fresh perspective to the programs or activities being reviewed. For example, a subcommittee working on a particular degree program might be well-served with members that include not only the program director and students or alumni/ae from the program but also a trustee or staff member who is less familiar with the program and might be able to bring new questions to the work of self-evaluation and planning.

Alternately, the subcommittee might do an audit of the skills, experiences, and perspectives brought by members of the subcommittee and then develop strategies to gather information and seek feedback from those with differing lenses and experiences. At times, a school may find an outside consultant to be helpful to the self-study process but should remember that this cannot be a substitute for the school's own stakeholders having significant ownership of the process. Even as it considers issues of membership and structure, the school is encouraged to keep the end in mind and design a process that will be meaningful to the school, as well as effective in meeting the expectations of Commission accreditation.

Leadership roles

Along with the steering committee and the subcommittees, two individuals are crucial to the success of the self-study process: the director of the self-study process and the editor of the self-study report. 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.

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 school, and the ability to facilitate a complex task over a period of time. Because directors are required to ask a variety of persons to do a variety of tasks, they should be authorized by the school in ways that ensure cooperation and support of the broader community. The self-study director should have ready access to the chief academic and chief executive officer as needed.

The editor of the final report brings the various subcommittee reports and other documents into a coherent and usable report that serves the needs of the school, the accreditation evaluation committee, and the Board of Commissioners. The editor should have a clear understanding of the Commission *Standards* and should be comfortable writing/editing in ways that allow the report to embody an appropriate blend of description, evidence, analysis, and recommendations as is needed for Commission accreditation. Like the director, the editor should be able to work effectively with a range of stakeholders and should be skilled working both with fine details and the big picture. The editor or designated assistants are also often the ones who format the report

according to Commission guidelines and who curate the appendix and supplemental resources that will accompany the self-study report.

Neither the director nor the editor should have the final word in the self-study process, as both the process and the report need to be owned and understood by the school as a whole. For this reason, selecting the right person or people to fill these roles can make both the process and the outcome much more efficient, effective, and enjoyable for all involved.

Timeline

As noted earlier, for most schools, the self-study process begins two years prior to the scheduled comprehensive evaluation visit, when schools are invited to attend the Commission's Self-Study Workshop at the ATS offices in Pittsburgh. Early in the process—and, in consultation with the school's Commission staff liaison, if desired—the school should develop a timeline that makes sense in light of its own context. In most cases, the full self-study process takes between one and two years, depending upon the complexity and capacity of the school. As an example, the following draft schedule is based on a process that takes three full semesters, plus one for the workshop and one for the visit. This schedule could easily be abbreviated, depending on the size and context of the school, which is why schools are encouraged to develop their own timeline early in the self-study process, in consultation with Commission staff as appropriate.

Year 1, First Term: The school sends one or two participants to the Commission's Self-Study Workshop in Pittsburgh. Following the workshop, the director, editor, and steering committee are formally appointed, and dates are identified for the steering committee's upcoming meetings. Schools that are already familiar with the accreditation process may choose to appoint a director, editor, and/or steering committee members prior to the Self-Study Workshop.

Year 1, Second Term: The steering committee begins meeting. It familiarizes itself with the Commission *Standards*, reviews the Self-Study Handbook, and reads through the school's accrediting history and the committee report from the last comprehensive evaluation visit (if the visit is for reaffirmation of accreditation). It discusses the goals and desired outcomes for the self-study process, in conversation with other senior leaders as appropriate. After this, the steering committee designs the organizational structure for the study, develops the subcommittee structure and writing assignments, finalizes an overall timetable for the study, and asks for volunteers or appoints members to each subcommittee.

Year 2, First Term: The subcommittees do their work, with the steering committee providing oversight and support as needed. Subcommittees review their assigned standards, gather evidence, engage in analysis, suggest recommendations, and begin drafting text. Subcommittees submit first drafts of their reports to the steering committee, which reviews them in the context of the study as a whole. The steering committee identifies concerns, gaps, or issues that should be addressed by the end of this term and encourages the subcommittees to continue their work as needed.

Year 2, Second Term: The steering committee receives and reviews the final subcommittee reports and directs the editor to draft a cohesive self-study report that “speaks with one voice” and that meets Commission expectations. The steering committee reviews the first full draft and solicits feedback from all key constituencies. Changes are made as needed, and the steering

committee guides the final revision process. At the conclusion of the process, the governing body “receives” the report and authorizes its submission (see part two of this handbook).

Year 3, First Term: The school hosts the comprehensive evaluation visit, having submitted the final self-study report to the ATS office (and appendices/supplemental material as needed) at least 60 days prior to the visit and to each committee member at least 45 days prior to the visit (see parts two and three of this handbook).

RESOURCES FOR THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

As noted earlier, schools do not need to take on the work of self-evaluation alone or in a vacuum. The Board of Commissioners provides resources and sponsors workshops for schools engaged in self-study. Because 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 throughout the self-study process. ATS also provides a variety of online resources to help schools engage this process well (see Appendix A. of this handbook, and the ats.edu website).

Schools are encouraged to begin the work of self-study by reviewing the Commission [Standards](#) (including the Preamble), this [Self-Study Handbook](#), the school’s own accrediting history, and the committee report from the last comprehensive evaluation visit (if the visit is for reaffirmation of accreditation)—all of which are available from the Commission office. Schools may find it helpful to review their own last self-study report, for ATS or for other agencies, but should recognize that the Commission [Standards](#) have changed and that certain aspects of the school may have changed as well. During the Self-Study Workshop, schools will have the opportunity to look at exemplary self-study reports and review other resources that may assist them during the self-study process.

Other ATS resources that might be particularly useful to schools engaging in the self-study process include the [ATS Strategic Information Report](#), the [ATS Institutional Peer Profile Report](#), the [ATS Data Visualization Tool](#), and the [ATS Annual Data Tables](#), which are available to schools as part of their ATS membership. Schools that utilize the [ATS Student Questionnaires](#) may find this to be a helpful tool, as well. Schools are encouraged to consult with ATS staff regarding other projects or resources that might be helpful in the self-study process, such as the [Guidelines For Understanding Finances](#), the [Guidelines for Global Awareness and Engagement](#), and [A Reflective Guide to Effective Evaluation for Theological Schools](#). Schools should also consider other resources available to them, such as their own assessment/evaluation data, internal reports or minutes of meetings, institutional research or institutional evaluation offices, or other sources of internal data. Schools might also find it helpful to consider external resources, such as denominational data or reports and studies from other bodies or may need to develop new resources to gather important information for the self-study process, such as satisfaction surveys or alumni/ae questionnaires. Schools are encouraged to refer to the Commission’s educational resources or consult with their Commission staff liaison, or with other schools that have successfully completed the self-study process, for further ideas.

Schools that participate in US Title IV federal loan programs (whether US or Canadian) must demonstrate compliance with all applicable Title IV responsibilities; see [Requirements for US Title IV Participants](#) in Appendix B. of this handbook.

PART TWO: THE SELF-STUDY REPORT

The self-study *report* is the written account of the study *process*, describing its method, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The Board of Commissioners 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 process, the self-study report has several purposes. It provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to have serious and sustained conversations about those issues that matter most to the mission and future of the school. It demonstrates the school's ability to analyze its effectiveness and develop plans for its own improvement. It also provides evidence of the ways in which the school is functioning in light of the Commission *Standards*. Finally, it provides the basis for the work of the evaluation committee and informs the accrediting decisions made by the Board of Commissioners.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REPORT

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 school 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* and should include evidence of how the school is meeting each standard and a discussion of where the school sees room for improvement. This is the major task of the self-study and should feature prominently in the self-study report. Finally, reports should clearly identify the *recommendations for improvement* that the school has developed as a result of the self-study process. These recommendations are usually cited at the end of each standard, though not every standard necessarily has recommendations. The last chapter of the report should summarize the most strategic recommendations, along with key strengths and ongoing concerns. These recommendations should, in turn, inform the school's strategic plan and budgeting processes, giving attention to the ongoing educational quality and financial vitality of the school.

Good self-study reports have several features in common. First, they describe the self-study process so that readers understand the activities of the study that resulted in the evaluation and recommendations it reports. Second, they have a coherent pattern of organization that clearly, but not rigidly, relates the material in the report to each standard. Third, they present the evidence that is crucial to understanding the issues in as clear and concise a manner as possible, including effective use of tables and figures, in ways that are interpreted thoughtfully and productively. Finally, they include concrete and specific recommendations that can be implemented by the school and that would clearly enhance the work of the school.

Weak or inadequate self-study reports are often overly descriptive, not evaluative, and too lengthy. Some lack a coherent organizational structure or fail to implement the organizational structure the report professes to have. Others attend too rigidly to an organizational structure that fails to achieve the purposes of the report (e.g., treating each section of each standard as a separate compliance item, rather than making connections to overall institutional and educational quality). Some weak reports fail to provide the evidence that supports the study's findings or offer conclusions that appear not to be based on meaningful information (e.g., data that do not inform the conclusions or data that come only from a single source, like satisfaction surveys); others overwhelm readers with excessively long or overly complex listings of data that are not interpreted or analyzed. Reports that fail to describe and evaluate the school thoughtfully and carefully in the context of the *Standards* are not useful and make the evaluation committee's work far more challenging.

In general, a good self-study report should provide a readable and useful description of the school, the self-study process, the evaluation of the school in terms of the *Standards*, and the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the self-study process. The report 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 comment on the adequacy of the school's self-study report within the committee's report.

Beyond this, as noted in the Preamble to the *Standards of Accreditation*,

Within the context of graduate theological education, accreditation is an ongoing way to live into the intersections of faith and learning. It involves giving close attention to the histories that ground us and the visions of the future that draw us forward. It is grounded in care for people, communities, and schools, now and in the future. It emphasizes stewardship and responsibility, while also holding space for grace and interdependence. It acknowledges the centrality of the unique mission of each individual school, while also recognizing that there is more that brings us together than separates us. Accreditation helps schools improve—not simply for their own sake, but primarily for the benefit of others, including the religious communities and other constituencies who serve and are served by their students. For all these reasons, accreditation is a deeply theological act with a focus on students, especially on student learning and formation.

Good self-study reports go beyond questions of compliance and conformity, or of efficiency and effectiveness, and reach instead to levels of imagination and aspiration. They become theological reflections on the mission and future of the school and involve sustained and strategic conversations about key issues the school is facing. Self-studies that accomplish these purposes require thoughtful and broad-based work, and they serve the school very well—regardless of the findings of an evaluation committee.

To assist the school in writing its self-study report, the *Standards* are accompanied by a set of [Self-Study Ideas](#) (see also Appendix A) that are meant to give schools ideas about how they might engage the *Standards* in their self-study reports. The *Ideas* mostly use the word “might” to indicate that these are not the only ways schools can demonstrate that they meet the *Standards*—

which they must do in some way—nor are these necessarily the best ways for all schools. Some ideas use the word “should” to describe common expectations that derive directly from the *Standards* or that address specific Commission requirements. Seven ideas use the word “must” to highlight regulatory requirements for US Title IV schools—summarized in 1.6 (see 3.2, 3.11, 3.12, 7.5, 7.9, 7.11, and 10.7). Schools, however, should focus on the *Standards*, not the *Ideas* nor nuances between “might” or “should.” The *Ideas* are not subsidiary standards. The Board and evaluation committees will review schools on the basis of the *Standards* and *Policies*, not the *Ideas*.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Organization

While schools should design their self-study *processes* in ways that fit with their mission and context, every self-study *report* must follow the same basic outline and contain these common elements. It must begin with an introductory chapter and school synopsis. It should then have one chapter for each standard (1-10), giving attention to master’s degrees (within standard 4) and doctoral degrees (within standard 5) as appropriate. It will end with a concluding chapter. Schools may find it helpful to include a preface (e.g., a list of abbreviations or other orienting materials) or a listing at the end of the report of all appendices/supplemental materials and should include a cover/title page that clearly indicates the name of the school and the date or semester of the scheduled comprehensive evaluation visit.

Introductory chapter. The opening chapter should accomplish four primary tasks. *First*, it should provide a brief description of the mission and context of the school, including its history and ecclesial or denominational commitments (recognizing that these will be described in more detail later in the self-study). This should orient the readers to the special qualities, programs, or structures of the school; the better informed the evaluation committee and the Commissioners are about the school and its unique characteristics, the better able they will be to evaluate the school in terms of its own mission and purposes. *Second*, the chapter should summarize major changes or developments in the school since the last comprehensive evaluation visit (again, noting that these may be described in more detail later in the self-study). *Third*, it should review the school’s accreditation history since the last comprehensive evaluation, including the school’s responses to the last accreditation evaluation committee’s recommendations (from the full committee report), as well as the specific actions required by the Board of Commissioners (from the action letter—noting the distinctive strengths to maintain, the areas of needed growth, and any specific follow-up actions, as well as the school’s accrediting history since the last comprehensive visit). *Fourth*, the introduction should give an overview of the design and process of the self-study, including a description of the committee structure and how the school sought to gain broad participation in the process. In many cases, a school may choose to write (or, at least, revise) the introductory chapter *after* completing the rest of the self-study report.

School synopsis. As an additional way to orient the evaluation committee to the distinctive features of the school, the self-study report should include a short section, located between the introduction and main narrative, to share key data and up-to-date information about the school.

In most cases, a school will write the synopsis *after* completing the rest of the self-study report and will ensure it is up to date before sending it to the Commission office and the evaluation committee. This brief synopsis includes the following items:

- A list of all graduate theological degree programs, indicating the number of credits and the current student enrollment (headcount and FTE) for each degree program.
- A list of all additional locations utilized by the school, indicating the address and noting which degrees and how much of a degree can be earned at each site (i.e., a fourth to less than half, half or more, or a complete degree; do not list sites that offer less than a fourth of a degree).
- A description of whether the school uses online/distance education, indicating the modality (synchronous, asynchronous, blended, hybrid), any necessary state or provincial authorizations, and noting which degrees and how much of a degree can be earned via each format.
- The number of full- and part-time faculty, the number of full- and part-time staff, and the number of members of the school's governing body or advisory group.
- Whether the school has a formal relationship with any denominations or faith communities (and, if so, which one/s).
- Whether the school is accredited by any other agency (and, if so, which one/s).
- A link to school's announcement inviting comments on this visit, per *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.2 (see sample announcement at [this link](#)).
- A link to the school's statement of accreditation status, per *Policies and Procedures*, VII.A.6 (should reflect school's listing in ATS membership directory).
- A statement of whether the school is a US Title IV participant and, if so, what accrediting agency serves as its Title IV gatekeeper agency (ATS/COA or another).
- Confirmation of any required state or provincial authorizations needed to operate a postsecondary institution. (As a reminder, state authorization is an eligibility requirement for US Title IV eligibility.)

Main narrative. The body of the report should include a chapter on each of the ten Commission *Standards*. Within Standard 4 (master's degree programs) and Standard 5 (doctoral degree programs), schools should describe and evaluate each of the degree programs currently offered by the school. If a school has more than one degree in a category, such as more than one Master of Arts degree, it may describe and evaluate these degrees together or separately, depending on the degree structure (see the notes and self-study ideas for Standards 4 and 5 for more information). If a school does not offer a certain category of degree program, it can simply indicate that a given standard or grouping of standards does not apply (e.g., "The school does not offer the ThM, so Standards 4.10-12 are not applicable" or "the school does not offer doctoral degrees, so Standard 5 is not applicable"); it should then continue with Standard 6 as the sixth chapter of the report.

As noted earlier, the various chapters of the main narrative of the report should be written with one unified voice, with an appropriate balance between description, evidence, and evaluation. The report may find the self-study ideas to be helpful in framing the school's engagement with each standard. Schools that participate in the US Title IV federal loan program (whether US or Canadian) must demonstrate compliance with all applicable Title IV responsibilities when these

responsibilities are mentioned in a standard or self-study idea (see also the [Requirements for US Title IV Participants](#) in Appendix B of this handbook). Each chapter in the main narrative of the self-study report should conclude with a brief summary of the school's strengths, areas of needed growth, and any recommendations or follow-up steps related to this standard.

Concluding chapter. The final chapter should summarize the overall findings of the study and organize the key recommendations for educational and institutional improvement contained in the various parts of the report into a common set with assigned priorities. In anticipation of the recommendations of the evaluation committee and the eventual action of the Board of Commissioners, this chapter should clearly identify the following: (1) the strengths of the school that should be sustained as the school grows and develops; (2) ongoing concerns or 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 school is at risk of not meeting, does not fully meet, or does not meet one or more of the standards and how it has already implemented a credible plan to meet them in the near future. Finally, the conclusion should prioritize the recommendations that have emerged as part of the self-study process and should describe how the school plans to continue the ongoing process of self-reflection and self-evaluation, based on its experience with this self-study process, throughout the upcoming period of accreditation.

Length

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 not been able to identify the most critical elements of its review or the most crucial of its recommendations; not surprisingly, schools learn and discuss more during their self-study process than can (or should) fit in the self-study report, and so it is important to be selective about what is presented in the report. 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 school, and the value of being objective and honest in self-evaluation.

With the addition of a broad introduction and a thoughtful conclusion, most good self-study reports will be 65-100 pages, although reports for schools with doctoral programs or a significant number of master's degree programs may be longer. In most cases, schools should be able to engage Standards 1-3 and 6-10 (in other words, all standards other than those focused on particular degree programs) in 5-7 single-spaced pages per standard. Each degree program, similarly, can likely be covered well in five pages or less, with hyperlinks or references to supplemental material (e.g., the academic catalog or degree program handbook) as needed.

Because the length of the report will vary depending on the school's context and programs, schools should consult with their Commission staff liaison early in the self-study process (e.g., around the time of the Self-Study Workshop) to discuss a preferred page range for their own particular report. Commission staff are also glad to review an outline or draft of the self-study report, if the school would find that helpful.

Required appendices

Because every self-study is based on more sources of information than can be included with the main narrative of the report, the Board of Commissioners asks that every school include certain material in a document that is formally called “appendices.” These specific items (and the school’s self-study report) will be reviewed by the Board of Commissioners, along with the evaluation committee’s report, and will also become part of the school’s record with the Commission. As a result, they must be provided by the school in a specific format (even if these documents are also available via other means).

Items that must be included in the document entitled “appendices” are listed below and are the only items that should be included in the document entitled “appendices” (see the section on supplemental materials, below, regarding other items to be shared with the committee). The items listed here must be combined and formatted as a single PDF file on a flash drive, with each item bookmarked. They must be included in this specific order:

1. Current organizational chart, showing names and titles of all key administrative personnel
2. Current strategic plan(s)
3. Evaluation and assessment plan(s), including a schedule/timeline demonstrating how and when the school engages in educational evaluation, a list of artifacts used (for each degree, as appropriate), and evidence of how the school is closing the loop
4. Current budget for the theological school and a three- to five-year budget plan
5. Most recent fiscal year audit (and management letter, if available)
6. School handbooks: governing board, faculty, staff, and student
7. 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, including any required by federal or provincial regulations)
8. US Title IV documentation as applicable (see Appendix B. below)

If a school has a question about any of these items, it should contact its Commission staff liaison well in advance of the due date.

Supplemental materials

In addition to the items that must be included in the required appendices, other resources will need to be provided to the evaluation committee either as a digital resource or on-campus in a physical documents room. Because the Commission does not add these items to the school’s permanent accrediting file, the school may choose how to best make these accessible to the evaluation committee for the duration of the visit. Schools may choose to use entirely one method or a mix of multiple methods, recognizing that some documents (such as faculty books or promotional flyers) might only be available in print format and others (such as minutes, CVs, or syllabi) might be easiest to provide and access digitally.

Schools may choose to make digital materials available in whatever way they prefer (e.g., flash drive, hyperlink, LMS, document sharing service), as long as these can be easily navigated by

visitors. Electronic documents should be well organized, clearly labeled, and easily accessed; school personnel should be available to assist the evaluation committee with locating or printing documents as needed. While it is often helpful to make at least some digital supplemental materials available to the committee before they arrive on campus (given that their time on site is limited), these materials can also be made available in the committee's on-campus workroom (e.g., via a dedicated laptop in the committee workroom).

The *Self-Study Ideas* include some suggestions about supplemental materials that may serve as helpful evidence, and the school may wish to include these documents as part of the committee's supplemental resources. While the school *may* provide any resources that the school believes will be helpful to the evaluation committee, the supplemental materials *typically* include at least the following documents:

- Minutes of governing board and faculty meetings for last five years (embedded schools may include only those minutes related to the theological school)
- Audited financial statements (with any applicable management letters) for the three years prior to the most recent one provided in the required appendices
- A list of courses being offered in the current academic term, indicating name of the instructor, the location of the course (main campus or additional location), the format of the course (residential/intensive/online/etc.), and the enrollment (if known)
- Syllabi (include representative samples of courses taught in every program by various faculty, as well as samples of courses taught in every delivery format)
- Detailed evaluation results for each degree program for the last three to five years (and sample evaluation instruments as appropriate)
- Current faculty CVs (and, upon request, the school should be prepared to give the evaluation committee access to faculty transcripts showing advanced degrees)
- Samples of faculty publications
- Samples of student theses (for each degree program as appropriate)
- Samples of promotional materials

Schools that participate in US Title IV federal loan programs (whether US or Canadian) should also refer to the "[Requirements for US Title IV Participants](#)" in Appendix B of this handbook.

INSTITUTIONAL ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

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 school in the context of its strategic planning and budgeting, appropriate constituencies within the school should have the opportunity to participate in a process of review and endorsement of the final report of the self-study, prior to submission of the final report to ATS and the evaluation committee. The school's

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 faculty support. The governing body, or its executive committee, should take formal action to “receive” the self-study report prior to its submission to the ATS office, 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.

SUBMISSION AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE REPORT

The final report should be prepared in both a paper and PDF version. In both cases, the report should be single-spaced and should include page numbers and a table of contents. The paper version should be printed double-sided and coil-bound. The PDF version should include bookmarks for each chapter.

Schools hosting an evaluation visit for **reaffirmation of accreditation** are expected to follow the submission guidelines below.

1. **60 days before the visit**, the school should send these *two* items to both the Commission office *and* to their ATS Commission staff liaison whose address will be provided:
 - A coil-bound, double-sided print copy of the self-study report (without appendices).
 - A USB flash drive with two PDF files: one PDF with the self-study report, and one PDF with the required appendices (with all appendices combined into one PDF file and bookmarked). If it wishes, the school can also include supplemental materials on this USB drive, as long as they are labeled appropriately and not mixed with the required appendices (e.g., in a file folder marked “supplemental materials”).

Upon receipt, the school’s Commission staff liaison will review the self-study report to ensure that it is complete and meets Commission expectations. If any significant corrections or additional materials are needed, the liaison may request an addendum (which could then be added to the versions of the self-study report given to members of the evaluation committee) or, in rare instances, may request a revision of the self-study report in order to meet the expectations of the Commission. Schools are welcome to send an earlier draft or outline to Commission staff for their review if they wish.

2. **45 days before the visit** (and, typically, after hearing from the Commission liaison that the report meets Commission expectations), the school should send these *two* items to each member of the evaluation committee (but not to the Commission staff liaison unless significantly revised):

- A coil-bound, doubled-sided print copy of the self-study report (without appendices).
- A USB flash drive with two PDF files: one PDF with the self-study report, and one PDF with the required appendices (with all appendices combined into one PDF file and bookmarked). If it wishes, the school can also include supplemental materials on this USB drive, as long as they are labeled appropriately and not mixed with the required appendices (e.g., in a separate file folder marked “supplemental materials”).

For schools seeking **initial accreditation**, Board policy requires the Board to evaluate the self-study report prior to authorizing an initial accreditation evaluation visit. In this instance, copies of the completed self-study report and required appendices (formatted according to the guidelines described above) must be sent to the Commission office and to the Commission staff liaison 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. If the school has additional locations, it should also submit either a [Petition related to Additional Location](#) (if offering more than half of a degree) or a [Notification related to Additional Location](#) (if offering more than 25 percent but less than half a degree). Schools seeking approval for comprehensive distance education should submit the [Petition for Distance \(Online\) Education](#), as well. These forms are available on the ATS website.

The **due dates** are November 1 for the winter (February) meeting (with a potential initial accreditation visit in spring of that year) and April 1 for the summer (June) meeting of the Board of Commissioners (with a potential initial accreditation visit in fall of that year). Schools seeking initial accreditation should contact their Commission staff liaison early in the self-study process to confirm these dates. At least 45 days prior to the visit, the report and appendices should also be sent to the evaluation committee members as described above.

PART THREE: THE SELF-STUDY VISIT

In addition to engaging in a comprehensive self-study process and writing the self-study report, the school's other major task involves hosting a committee of peer reviewers for an onsite visit. This section of the *Self-Study Handbook* describes the activities that a school undertakes before, during, and after the self-study visit. The Commission provides a variety of training and support resources for schools as they plan and support the visit; see the Commission [website](#) for more details. Please contact your Commission staff liaison with any questions.

BEFORE THE VISIT

Identification of evaluation dates

For schools seeking reaffirmation of accreditation, the semester and year of the next anticipated self-study visit is listed on the school's [membership directory page](#) of the ATS website. The school's Commission staff liaison will initiate a conversation with the school's chief executive officer or accreditation liaison officer two to three years in advance of the anticipated visit to set specific dates for the visit. Schools seeking initial accreditation should be in contact with accrediting staff early in the self-study process to discuss possible visit dates and timelines.

Self-study visits typically last four days (two full days and two partial days), often Monday afternoon through Thursday morning. Additional time may be required if the visit will include site visits to additional locations (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.1). As much as possible, the school should ensure that all key school personnel are available on the dates of the visit. Because accrediting staff are involved with numerous visits and other activities each semester, dates will be negotiated that fit both school and accrediting staff calendars.

Approval of the committee roster

As described earlier in this handbook, the Commission's approach to accreditation is based on a steadfast commitment to peer review, embodied by an onsite evaluation committee and by the subsequent work of the ATS Board of Commissioners. Individuals are invited to serve on an evaluation committee because of their general competence in theological education, as well as their specific areas of expertise, such as academics, finances, administration, library, student services, or technology. Individuals are also chosen to reflect the breadth and diversity of the ATS membership, as well as the needs and context of the particular school being visited.

Evaluation committees for comprehensive visits are typically comprised of three to five persons, not counting Commission staff, although some committees will be larger. Committees include at least one administrator, one academic/educator, and (for schools that participate in US federal student aid programs) one ministry practitioner. Evaluation committees for schools offering distance education include at least one person with experience and training in distance education. Committee members receive training in the interpretation and application of the *Standards*, as well as orientation to their role as accreditation evaluation committee members prior to each visit. Commission staff provide support for all comprehensive evaluation visits. Further details

on the appointment, training, and evaluation of committee members can be found in Commission *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.5-7. As part of a peer evaluation process, members of Commission evaluation committees serve without remuneration, and accredited schools are encouraged to make it possible for their faculty and administrators to serve on evaluation committees when requested. ATS members have also indicated that one of the best ways to learn about the accrediting process (as well as valuable professional development more broadly) is to serve as a peer reviewer on a comprehensive visit to another school; please feel free to contact Commission staff if you are interested in serving in this way.

The primary tasks of the evaluation committee are to review the school's self-study and related materials and to engage in conversation with a wide range of the school's personnel and stakeholders. Based on what it learns from this process, the evaluation committee helps the school by affirming its strengths and noting areas of needed growth (these findings may echo what the school has already learned about itself—especially if the self-study process was thorough and candid). The committee carefully evaluates the school and its educational programs in the context of the Commission *Standards* and prepares a report and recommendations to be considered by the Board of Commissioners.

ATS Commission staff begin the process of recruiting volunteers for evaluation committees well before the comprehensive visit. Each school hosting an evaluation visit is given a proposed roster of evaluators well in advance of the visit to determine if the school sees any conflict of interest, which includes occasions when the individual or any immediate family member is a current or former student, employee, trustee, or consultant (see the full list of conflicts of interest in *Policies and Procedures*, VI.B.1).

Announcing the visit

As described in Commission *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.2, schools hosting a comprehensive evaluation visit for reaffirmation of accreditation or for initial accreditation must make a public announcement (e.g., on a prominent place on the school's website) of the date and reason for the visit at least 45 days before the visit. The announcement must also include contact information for where to send comments on the school's ability to meet the Commission *Standards*. The contact information *may* include someone at the school; it *must* include the ATS accrediting office email address and phone number (accrediting@ats.edu; 412-788-6505). The school must provide copies of all comments it receives to the evaluation committee during the visit. A sample announcement for a self-study visit is provided on the ATS website (see [Evaluation Visits](#) under the Accreditation tab).

Logistics and local arrangements

Schools are responsible for making the local arrangements for the committee's visit. In making these arrangements, schools should be mindful that committee members have a great deal of work to accomplish in a very short period of time, and that committee members are volunteers who serve without remuneration. The school's efforts to provide gracious hosting and comfortable housing will facilitate this work while also grounding the visit in the spirit of hospitality and peer engagement.

- *Visit coordinator.* The school should identify a visit coordinator, typically a member of the school's staff, who takes the lead in making local arrangements and coordinating these with Commission staff and with the evaluation committee.
- *Lodging.* Well in advance of the evaluation visit, the school should arrange for single room accommodations for committee members and Commission staff at a comfortable hotel (or other appropriate facility) near the school. These accommodations should include a restaurant or other appropriate breakfast service. Typically, the school should reserve rooms for three nights for a comprehensive evaluation and one or two nights for a focused evaluation visit. Occasionally, a committee member may require a fourth night's accommodation for a comprehensive evaluation visit 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 committee member. The school should arrange to be billed directly by the hotel for the costs of rooms and any breakfasts eaten at the hotel.
- *Meeting space at hotel.* The school should arrange a meeting space for the committee at the hotel, which committees will typically use for several hours on the opening day of the evaluation and may also use in the late afternoons or evenings on the other days of the visit. The hotel meeting room could be the sitting area of a suite, if it is of sufficient size to provide comfortable workspace for the committee in a space that is separated from any sleeping areas, or it may be a separate meeting room in the hotel. The school is encouraged to consult with Commission staff about their particular committee's needs.
- *Hospitality at the hotel.* It is common for the school to provide a small hospitality basket in each committee member's hotel room; committee members are particularly grateful for bottled water, light snacks, and a small item that represents the school (e.g., a coffee mug, notepad, or other promotional item). However, schools should avoid giving gifts of value or treating evaluators in ways that could appear to be courting a positive evaluation.
- *Transportation.* The school is responsible for all local transportation for each committee member and Commission staff from the airport upon arrival, throughout the entire evaluation visit, and to the airport for departure. Commission staff may occasionally offer to do some of the driving; the school should consult with their staff liaison about this possibility, but please note that this is always at the discretion of the staff liaison and should not be assumed. Committee members and accrediting staff will make their own plane or other travel reservations and inform the school of their plans but will submit those expenses for reimbursement to the ATS Commission office, not to the school.
- *Meals.* As noted above, breakfast each day should be available at the hotel. Noon meals are usually provided by the school on campus, and often align with the committee's interviews with students (second day) and trustees (third day). Dinner on the first night is hosted by the school at a place of its choice (on campus or at a nearby restaurant); see "during the visit" for more information. Committees dine on their own on the second and third nights. Schools are asked to provide recommendations and may need to arrange transportation to any local restaurants for the committee unless other arrangements are made with Commission staff or the committee chair. Commission staff typically cover dinner meals on the second and third nights (see *Policies and Procedures*, V.C.8).

- *Meeting space on campus.* The school should provide a convenient room on campus for the exclusive use of the committee throughout the visit. This room should be large enough to provide workspace for the entire committee; it should not be used for meetings or interviews. The school should consult with Commission staff about technology needs, but the room should at least have wireless internet access (including passwords as needed), a projector or wall-mounted monitor, a printer, and access to the school's electronic supplemental resources. The workroom should also contain any printed documents and supporting material referenced in the self-study, such as faculty publications or promotional materials. The room should be secure and/or should have keys provided to Commission staff or committee members, since they typically leave personal items in that room. The school should also provide simple amenities such as coffee, tea, juice, bottled water, ice, and snacks (e.g., chips, cookies, nuts, fruit) for use by the committee while on campus.

To help coordinate these logistics, the school will receive from ATS staff a *Travel Information Form*, usually at the time that the visit team roster is shared with the school. The school's visit coordinator should fill out the top portion of this form (including contact information, hotel information, and preferred airport information) and email it to each committee member and to the ATS Commission staff once a hotel or other appropriate lodging has been selected, but no later than 45 days before the visit. Committee members and Commission staff will fill out this form (indicating their arrival and departure times, contact information, and any dietary restrictions or other needs) and then return the form to the visit coordinator, who can use this information to adjust the hotel reservations (if needed) and to arrange for local transportation.

Finalizing the visit schedule

In the weeks leading up to the committee's arrival, Commission staff will help facilitate the development of the visit schedule, in conjunction with the visit chair, ensuring that both the committee and the school have the opportunity to give input into the creation of a schedule that meets the needs of the committee while also working around the needs of the school. The schedule will typically include opportunities for committee members to interview the school's chief executive officer, chief academic officer, other key administrators, some or all full-time faculty members, representative part-time or adjunct faculty members, representative groups of students enrolled in each of the approved degree programs, recent graduates, field placement supervisors, representative members of the governing body, and other stakeholders as determined by the committee. Any necessary site visits to additional locations (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.1) may be scheduled to occur before, during, or after the main campus visit. Embedded schools will want to consult with their liaison regarding the inclusion of various university personnel in the visit schedule. A sample comprehensive visit schedule is available from Commission staff.

DURING THE VISIT

Much of the school's work will actually be completed prior to the arrival of the accreditation evaluation committee. The school's primary responsibilities during the evaluation itself include

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

Opening dinner

As noted above, the opening dinner is designed to provide an opportunity for the evaluation committee to meet members of the school community in a social manner prior to the formal start of the visit. The school should select a location that fosters easy conversation (such as a private room) and that enables committee members and school personnel to get to know each other. Participants from the school typically include the chief executive officer and other members of the school community selected by the school, such as members of the self-study steering committee and/or other key stakeholders. Because some committee members may have had a long travel day or be changing time zones, and because the committee may still need to do some work after dinner, this modest dinner should not run late into the evening.

Interviews and availability

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 available to be interviewed by videoconference or telephone call. While every effort will be made to have a complete schedule prepared in advance of the visit, the school should anticipate that the committee may require changes to 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 typically not be changed. Because the schedule of individual interviews may be changed during the evaluation, the school should alert faculty and staff to be available on short notice throughout the entire visit. At the same time, the school should caution individuals that the committee may not interview everyone. In the limited time of the evaluation visit, the committee typically cannot meet individually with all stakeholders.

The school is encouraged to designate one individual (often the visit coordinator) to be available to the committee throughout the visit. Commission staff and the visit chair will depend on this person, during the day or evening, to arrange changes in the interview schedule, answer questions, secure additional documentation, or respond to other needs of the committee. The school should be prepared, on short notice, to accommodate requests for changes in the schedule or for additional information. Committee members are judicious in their requests, but their task requires them to assess all appropriate information carefully, and they may discover they need information that neither they nor the school anticipated in advance.

Exit meeting

At the conclusion of the visit, the committee will present the school's senior leadership with the committee's findings. It is Commission policy that this exit meeting be limited to reading the committee's formal recommendations and presenting one written copy to the chief executive officer (or designee). It is not a time for conversation or discussion, although participants may express their appreciation for each other or offer a prayer for those gathered. During the exit meeting, the chair or accrediting staff member will review the procedures to be followed

subsequent to the evaluation visit, including that the committee's recommendations are meant to be held in confidence until they are reviewed and finalized by the Board of Commissioners (who may accept or adjust the recommendations). This exit meeting usually lasts only 15-30 minutes and typically occurs early on the morning of the final day. The evaluation committee departs immediately after this meeting, typically no later than 10 am.

AFTER THE VISIT

Responding to the draft committee report

Following the evaluation visit, the evaluation committee will prepare a report that provides a narrative evaluation of the school in light of the Commission *Standards*, and which contextualizes all recommendations made by the committee in their exit report. As soon as possible after the evaluation (and, typically within two weeks of the conclusion of the visit), the chair will send a draft of the committee report to the school's chief executive and academic officers, inviting the school to review the draft for corrections of factual errors. The school should send its response to the committee chair (copying the school's Commission staff liaison) within one week of receiving this draft. After considering the school's response, the chair, in consultation with other committee members as appropriate, will finalize and submit the final report to the Board (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.8-9).

Responding to the final committee report

Once the evaluation committee chair has submitted the committee's final report to the Board of Commissioners, the accrediting staff will send a copy of this report to the school's chief executive officer, chief academic officer, and accreditation liaison officer, with an invitation to respond. At this time, the school may prepare a written response for consideration by the Board, either to concur with the committee's findings or to request that the Board reconsider the committee's findings, in whole or in part. The school may also request to address the Board in person at the meeting when the committee report will be considered, although this is an option rarely taken by schools. A cover letter accompanying the committee report will describe to the school its options and timeline for responding to the final committee report.

Sharing the final committee report with key stakeholders

The school should share the evaluation committee report with key stakeholders, including the governing body and full-time faculty, once it receives the final report from the Commission office. However, it should not publish or share any part of the committee report, including its recommendations, with the wider public until after the Board of Commissioners acts on the committee's recommendations (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.10).

Actions of the Board of Commissioners

The full Board of Commissioners meets twice a year, typically in February and June. Reports from fall evaluation visits are reviewed in February and reports from spring evaluation visits are

reviewed in June. Before taking any action regarding a comprehensive evaluation visit, the Board reviews each school's self-study report (and appendices, as needed), the evaluation committee report and recommendations, and any formal response from the school. The Board may choose to accept the evaluation committee's recommendations, or it may make modifications as it deems appropriate. A letter reporting the Board action will be sent to the school no later than 30 days from the date of the Board meeting. Any applicable review or appeal processes will be described in the Board's action letter (see *Policies and Procedures*, VII.A, VII.C, and VIII). Summaries of actions related to accredited status, approved degree programs and additional locations, any required follow-up reports, and any imposition of warnings or probation are published in the ATS [membership directory](#) (see *Policies and Procedures*, VIII.A.1-5). Once the school has received the Board's action letter, it is welcome to share publicly the results of the comprehensive evaluation (see *Policies and Procedures*, III.B.10). The school must then also update its website to reflect any changes in its accreditation status or approved degree programs (see *Policies and Procedures*, VIII.A.6).

Invoice for evaluation-related expenses

Annual dues paid by member schools support most of the ongoing costs of Commission accreditation. In accordance with Commission policy, schools hosting comprehensive evaluation visits are charged a set fee for the evaluation visit and are also billed for travel costs; schools with visits to additional locations conducted as part of the comprehensive evaluation may have additional charges. Evaluation visit fees and billing policies are published on the [ATS website](#). Invoices are mailed at the conclusion of the semester in which the visit occurs and are payable upon receipt (see *Policies and Procedures*, V.C.8).

Evaluation of the comprehensive evaluation visit

After the Board of Commissioners has acted on the recommendations of the evaluation committee, the Commission office will send a survey to the school to gather evaluative feedback on the accreditation process—from the initial staff contact through the evaluation visit to the Board action. Completion of this survey is an important contribution to the Board's own evaluative efforts to monitor its processes and procedures to better serve the overall purpose of the Commission: "to contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education." Schools are also welcome to give feedback on any stage of the accrediting process directly to their Commission staff liaison, to the senior director of accreditation, to the Board of Commissioners, or to the executive director of ATS.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Self-study is a significant process, in both senses of that word—it takes considerable effort (if done well), and it can have substantial value (if done well). Schools completing a comprehensive self-study process deserve to take time to celebrate their accomplishments as they conclude each of the three levels described in this handbook – the self-study process, the self-study report, and the self-study visit. At the same time, organizational and educational evaluation, when done well, is a continuous loop: naming goals and desired outcomes, gathering evidence of those outcomes,

analyzing and interpreting this evidence, making changes ... and then returning again to the cycle of evaluation to see whether these changes had their desired effects, and whether further changes are needed. Evaluation also plays an ongoing role in institutional planning, program development, and resource allocation. Schools are encouraged to take what they have learned—from the self-study process, the self-study report, and the self-study visit—to further the mission and work of their school, to enhance student learning and formation, and to better engage the communities they seek to serve.

Congratulations on a job well done ... and blessings on the journey that continues on.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. LINKS TO ATS RESOURCES FOR SELF-STUDY

The following resources are available on the ats.edu website. Please consult your Commission staff liaison as needed.

[ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation with Self-Study Ideas](#)

[Self-Study Handbook \(September 2023 edition\)](#)

[A Reflective Guide to Effective Evaluation for Theological Schools](#)

[Guidelines for Achieving Initial Accreditation](#)

[Guidelines on Competency-Based Theological Education \(CBTE\)](#)

[Guidelines for Global Awareness and Engagement](#)

[Guidelines for Understanding Standard 10.3 on Finances](#)

[Microsoft PowerPoint - Characteristics of Good Self-Study Reports \(Feb 2022\)](#)

[Resources for Assessment Coordinators](#)

[Petition Forms - Substantive Change](#)

APPENDIX B. REQUIREMENTS FOR US TITLE IV PARTICIPANTS

Standard 1.6 requires that “any school that participates in US federal student aid programs meets all government regulations for those programs.” Those regulations are identified in the *Self-Study Ideas* for Standard 1.6 as well as the seven Standards listed below. Evaluation committees will review the self-study reports and supporting materials for every Title IV participant (whether the Commission or another agency is their Title IV gatekeeper) to ensure that the school addresses not only all applicable Standards, but also each of the following specific requirements. Schools embedded in a larger educational entity may rely on that entity for documentation for all items below, except the first one regarding course syllabi.

Completion of this form, together with documentation and/or links to the supportive documents, is to be submitted to the evaluation committee with the self-study report as Appendix 8 (see page 24 of this handbook).

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US Title IV Documentation

1. Standard 3.2 on Academic Rigor

While every school must demonstrate academic rigor, a Title IV school must document how it meets the [federal definition of a credit hour](#) (34 CFR §600.2). To verify that it does, the school must provide to the evaluation committee a sampling of syllabi that represent all types of courses, course lengths, degree programs, and delivery modalities.

DOCUMENTATION:

2. Standard 3.11 on Educational Policies

While every school must have and follow the policies described in this Standard, a Title IV school must also demonstrate it has and follows a [satisfactory academic progress](#) policy (see CFR §668.34). The school must document the policies stated in Standard 3.11, including a satisfactory academic progress policy, and provide evidence that it follows its stated practices.

DOCUMENTATION:

3. Standard 3.12 on Transfer of Credit Policy

While every school must have and follow an appropriate transfer of credit policy, a Title IV school must also document any articulation agreements for transfer of credits with other accredited schools or any contracts with non-accredited entities to provide up to one-fourth of a degree.

DOCUMENTATION:

4. Standard 7.5 on Student Safety

While every school must provide a safe environment for students, a Title IV school must also document that it meets the [Clery Act](#) disclosing campus crime statistics and security information through public posting of their annual security report due October 1 (see also the USDE's [campus security website](#)). If the school also has on-campus housing, the annual fire safety report must also be posted.

DOCUMENTATION:

5. Standard 7.9 on Student Debt

While every school must regularly review student educational debt and develop strategies as needed to reduce debt, a Title IV school must also provide its most recent [federal student loan cohort default rate](#) and its response to any excessive default rate.

DOCUMENTATION:

6. Standard 7.11 on Placement

While every school must monitor placement rates, a Title IV school that uses those rates for marketing or recruitment purposes (excluding its public statement of educational effectiveness, per Standard 2.8) must document that those rates have been verified by an external entity.

DOCUMENTATION:

7. Standard 10.7 on Financial Aid Audits

While every school must conduct an independent audit every year of its institutional finances, a Title IV school must also provide a copy of its most recent federal financial aid audit [for schools that exceed the \$750,000 minimum threshold] and its response to any findings. If the school has a [financial responsibility composite score](#) below 1.5, as determined by the US Department of Education (USDE), the school must provide a copy of that USDE letter and the school's response (e.g., posting a letter of credit, being subject to cash monitoring, etc.). Schools [on heightened cash monitoring](#) (HCM) are also required to submit a teach-out plan to the institutional accreditor serving as their Title IV gatekeeper. (Schools for which the Commission is gatekeeper should refer to *ATS Policies and Procedures* III.L.1-2.)

DOCUMENTATION:

