

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK
CHAPTER FOUR

*Guidelines for Members
of Accreditation Evaluation Committees*

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Introduction

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

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

Types of Evaluations

There are several different kinds of evaluations of schools.

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

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

Qualifications, Appointment, and Expectations of Evaluation Committee Members

Qualifications

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

Appointment

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

Expectations

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

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

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

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

Maintaining the Tone and Character of Commission Accreditation.

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

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

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

The Work of Commission Evaluation Committees

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

Before the Evaluation

Before the evaluation, committee members are expected to read

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the Evaluation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the Evaluation

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

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

Schedule for an Accreditation Evaluation

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

Arrival Day

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

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

First Full Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second Full Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Departure Day

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

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

Administrative Procedures and Policies

Required Time Commitment

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

Expense Reimbursement

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

Evaluator Evaluation

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

Conclusion

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