



Orientation for Focused Visit Evaluation Committees

ATS Commission on Accrediting
(revised December 2015)



The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

Purpose of this training session:

To help you engage the visit so that...

- The *visiting committee* does its work well
- The *visited school* understands what is needed
- The *visiting process* is candid but collegial
- The *Board of Commissioners* can decide well

RESULT:

Our “publics” have some *quality assurance*
Our schools experience *quality advancement*

Agenda for this orientation session:

- 1) What is a focused evaluation visit?
- 2) How do focused evaluation visits differ from comprehensive evaluation visits?
- 3) What are the steps/process for focused visits?
- 4) What other resources are available?
- 5) Concluding thoughts

Note: this orientation session assumes that you are already familiar with ATS/COA accreditation visits, Commission Standards, and so on, but recognizes that the work of a focused visit is somewhat different than that of other visits.

*As a refresher, you might find it helpful to review other orientation materials on the ATS Commission website under “Accrediting: Evaluation Visits”:
<http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/evaluation-visits>*

Contact Joshua Reinders (reinders@ats.edu) if you have any questions about these materials.

Commission Staff

Commission staff liaisons:



Lester
Ruiz



Tom
Tanner



Barbara
Mutch



Debbie
Creamer

In-house
staff:



Lori
Neff LaRue



Joshua
Reinders

What is a focused visit?

Two general kinds of focused visits:

- School-initiated (usually due to a new degree program or extension site)
- Board-initiated (usually due to one or more areas of concern or significant change)

What is a focused visit?

ATS Commission Policies and Procedures VII.B.1

“Focused evaluation visits may be authorized by the Board of Commissioners as a response to any of the following:

- VII.B.1.a a school’s invitation to the Board of Commissioners;
- VII.B.1.b a school’s decision to offer a new degree program, as noted in Section V of these Policies and Procedures;
- VII.B.1.c a school’s decision to offer 50 percent or more of the courses for an approved degree at a new location;
- VII.B.1.d a change in ownership or substantive change in the pattern of control of the institution;
- VII.B.1.e the receipt of other information that leads the Board of Commissioners to conclude that a focused evaluation visit is advisable;
- VII.B.1.f an indication that the quality of a school’s programs may have been adversely affected by changes in circumstances; or
- VII.B.1.g in the context of investigating a formal complaint against the institution when deemed appropriate.”



What is a focused visit?

ATS Commission Policy Manual II.C.14

“In addition to the conditions listed in the *ATS Commission Policies and Procedures*, VII.B.1, a focused visit may be required whenever the Board believes any of these conditions are present:

- A series of on-site, face-to-face conversations with multiple parties at a school will provide information and context that a single report, often written by a single individual, may not.
- A series of on-site, face-to-face conversations will highlight the importance of, and/or help give a school guidance in, one or more areas of improvement in ways that a written report may not.
- A series of on-site, face-to-face conversations will underscore the timeliness and/or urgency of the need for the school to provide information and/or help a school improve significantly (e.g., when a serious and/or public controversy has arisen that could impact the school’s ability to meet one or more Standards).”



How do focused visits differ from comprehensive visits?

- Shorter (typically one full day or two half days).
- Focused (looking at specific issues rather than the entire institution).
- Typically only two visitors (but this may vary); visitors are often recruited as “specialists” (you bring particular experience and skills to assist this school and the Board).
- Commission staff might not attend the visit (but will support by phone).
- The role of the committee chair may be less distinct than on other visits.

Note that focused visits are also similar to comprehensive visits in many ways, and so much of this will also be familiar to experienced visitors.

What is the process for a focused visit?

Before the visit:

- Receive and review documents
 - From ATS – prospectus, original petition (for school-initiated visits), action letter, accrediting history, and other relevant documents.
 - From the school – the prospectus will state what you can anticipate receiving.
- Make travel arrangements
 - The school will typically send you a travel information form; be sure to consult the prospectus and/or Commission staff before making travel reservations since the start/end time for focused visits often differs from other visits.
 - Joshua Reinders can answer logistics questions (e.g., reimbursement).
- Pre-visit conference call and draft schedule
 - The conference call typically includes a discussion of initial impressions, roles and writing assignments, and the visit schedule. The call may also highlight any additional documents needed at this point.
 - Commission staff may assist in drafting the visit schedule, in consultation with the committee and the school.

A reminder about conflicts of interest:

- Each committee member will receive a Conflict of Interest Form from the ATS office. This form must be filled out and submitted prior to participation on an evaluation visit.
- “A potential conflict of interest includes the following relationships with a school undergoing evaluation, whether the relationship involves that person or an immediate family member: employment (including past employment or prior/current application for employment); current employment at a school in a consortial relationship; enrollment as a student (past or present, including denial of admission); recipient of an award or honor; provision of goods or services; service as a trustee (past or present); regular recruitment of prospective students or staff; or any other relationship that could threaten a fair and objective evaluation.” (Board of Commissioners Policy Manual, I.C.2.d)
- No evaluation committee member who has a potential conflict of interest shall be involved in an evaluation or accrediting decision.
- If you suspect a potential conflict of interest, or have questions about the policy, please contact your Commission staff liaison immediately.

What is the process for a focused visit?

During the visit:

- Opening committee meeting (without school representatives present).
- Interviews and review of on-site documents.
 - See the next slide for notes on how these may differ based on type of visit.
- Debrief visit with Commission staff (in person or by phone).
- Deliver an “exit report” to the school.
 - Remember that the committee is only making recommendations to the Board of Commissioners, who may adjust these recommendations.
 - On some visits, the committee will leave a summary document with the school at this time (as with comprehensive visits); others give only a verbal report.

What is the process for a focused visit?

During the visit:

- School-initiated visits often involve confirming that the resources named in the petition are available and appropriate, and/or noting items that need further attention. Particular attention should be paid to the relevant Standards and Procedures, typically named in the prospectus (e.g., Educational Standard, section ES.3, for extension sites; Degree Program Standards, and other relevant Standards, for new degree programs)
- Board-initiated visits often draw on particular technical and interpersonal skills. Again, it is useful to attend to the relevant Standards and Procedures named in the prospectus (for example, *Policies and Procedures* VII.B.1.g regarding complaints, or *Policy Manual* II.C.14 regarding complex visits).
- Remember that a visitor's work should always be grounded in the Standards and Procedures – and should model careful, critical, impartial, and collegial engagement. Visitors might do some coaching, but are not consultants.

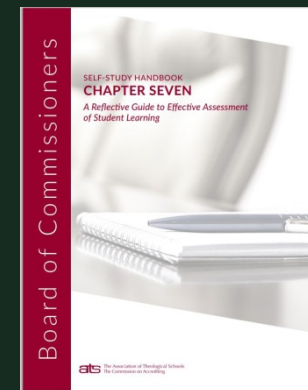
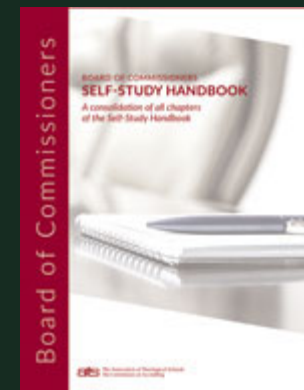
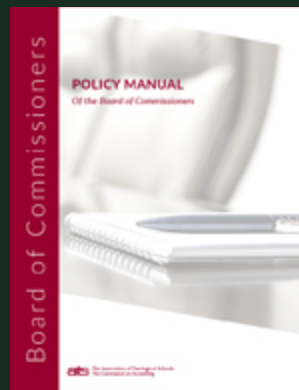
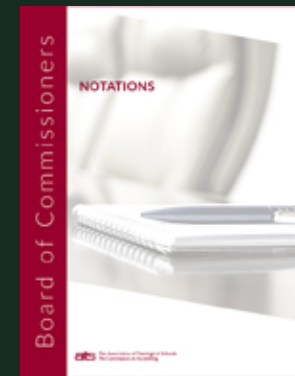
What is the process for a focused visit?

After the visit:

1. Promptly write report sections for which you are responsible.
Note that a focused visit report is much shorter than a comprehensive visit report (often only 3-5 pages). (See samples)
2. Chair combines and edits final committee report, using report template (see sample attached), and reviews completed draft report with other committee members and Commission staff.
3. Chair sends report to school for suggested correction of factual errors (within two weeks of visit). May need to prompt school to return the corrected report in a timely fashion (typically within two weeks)
4. Committee makes any appropriate corrections and finalize report; submit to Commission staff no later than a week after receiving it from school.

Note that sometimes these timelines may be accelerated to facilitate timely Board consideration; the prospectus will include any specific dates or timeline.

Resources for focused visits:



These can all be found on the ATS Commission website

Concluding Thoughts

- See the sample prospectus and committee reports (provided along with this training).
- Remember to review the prospectus for any visit.
- Commission staff are here to support you – please follow up with us if you have any questions!

Thank you for your service to theological education!

Thank you!



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