



## The Self-Study Report

Self-Study  
Workshop  
2024-2025

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This document is from the Self-Study Workshop and highlights what makes a good self-study report!



The Self-Study Report is **the story of your school**, particularly since your last (comprehensive) visit.

Just like the Vatican library, your institution has a unique story to tell, grounded in your history and context, and full of beauty. That is the Self-Study Report – a story of your school, particularly since the last comprehensive visit.

# What makes a “good self-study report”?

## Outline for this session:

- I. It has a **PURPOSE / (GOAL)** – to tell your school’s story well (1)
- II. It follows **GUIDELINES** – reflecting the *Standards* (bulk)
- III. It produces **RESULTS** – (1)
  - quality **assurance** to your school’s publics
  - and **improvement** of your school’s educational & institutional effectiveness

# I. PURPOSE (GOALS)

- 1) **Internal** goals

- Discuss key issue(s)
- Begin new strategic planning process

What do we most need to improve? Or what is our biggest challenge?

- 2) **External** goals

- Demonstrate educational quality to (ATS) peers
- Provides quality assurance to public(s) – current/future students, donors, etc.

Tell your story to sympathetic but objective strangers

- 3) **Eternal** goals

- Opportunity to reflect on what matters most to your mission
- Theological things with eternal consequences

(With Thanks to Tom Tanner)



## II. GUIDELINES reflecting the *Standards of Accreditation*

A Review

### 2020 *Self-Study Handbook*

**\*\*Use the latest edition on the web!!**

Introduction (history, educational principles, overview)

**Part 1: The Self-Study Process** (goals, organizing, resources)

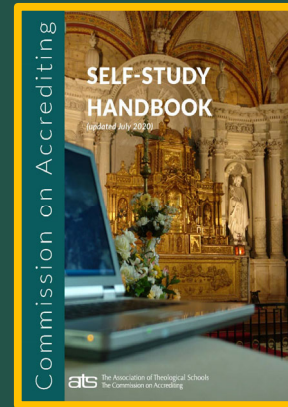
**Part 2: The Self-Study Report** (characteristics, structure)

**Part 3: The Self-Study Visit** (before, during, after)

Appendices:

A. Links to Self-Study Resources

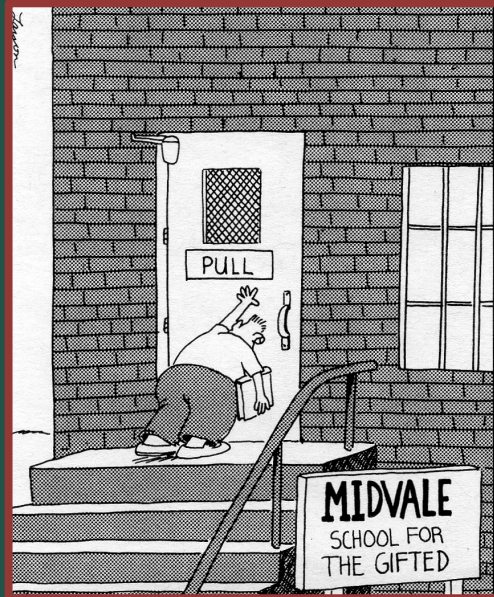
B. Requirements for US Title IV Participants



## A caution . . .

No matter how gifted you are,  
follow the signs 😊!

ATS Resources  
*Self-Study Handbook*  
***Standards with Self-Study Ideas***  
*2020 Standards of Accreditation*  
*A Reflective Guide to Effective Evaluation*  
*your ATS liaison*



## The self-study report . . .

- Five key characteristics



- The specific report structure



## Five key **characteristics**

The good self-study report is characterized by . . .

- 1) Sufficient **description**
- 2) Supporting **data** (evidence/documents)
- 3) **Evaluation** of the gathered data
- 4) Informed **recommendations**
- 5) In light of the school's **mission and context**





# 1) Sufficient **description**

- For the reader to understand the school and process of the self-study
  - Summary of school
  - How did the process engage the school community (stakeholders)?
    - Note: self-study not “farmed out” or the work of a few
- Tell your story to “sympathetic strangers” – peer evaluators, ~~consultants~~ (and BOC)
- *Standards* in one hand, self-study in the other (objectivity)
- Accurate description – looking in the mirror at “real you” vs through a stained-glass window at “rosy ideal” (reflection vs rose-colored-glasses)
- Specific description (names, titles)
- Evaluative description (what was effective or not?)

## Sufficient description

- **Weak report:** *“We have sufficient faculty, and they are all well qualified.”*
- **Good report:** *“We have seven full-time faculty; six have PhD degrees and one has a DMin (see Faculty Credentials in the Supplemental Materials for a detailed list).”*

## Sufficient **description**

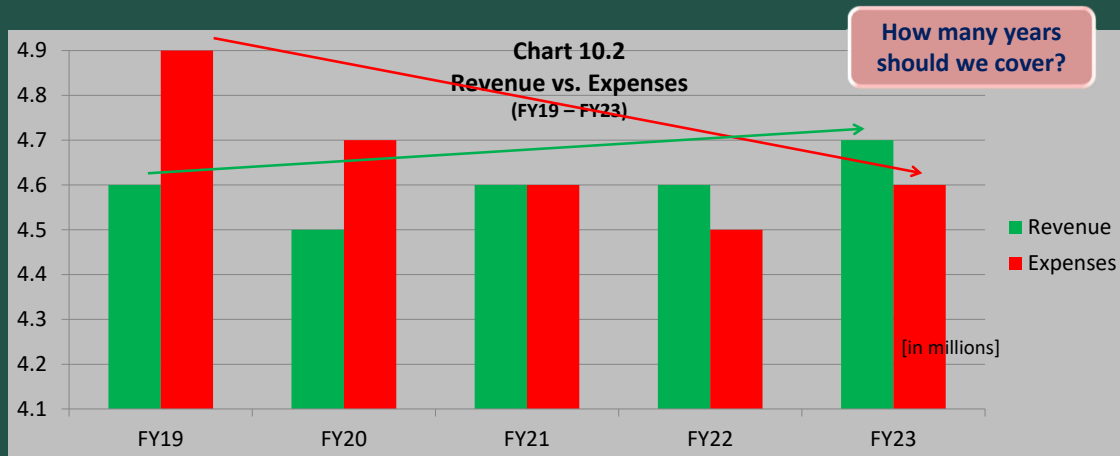
- **Weak report:** *“Our SLAP efforts have produced significant improvements.”*
- **Good report:** *“Our Student Learning Assessment Program (affectionately called SLAP by students) has produced these three improvements in student learning this past year. First, . . .”*

Acronyms are ok, but you need to provide a list early in your self-study

## 2) Supporting **data** (evidence/documents)

- Data crucial to understanding (not extraneous)
- Clear and concise data
- Use qualitative *and* quantitative data
- Use tables and charts to support narrative
- **Caution**
  - Use links for extensive data
  - *But include summary data in the narrative*
  - Links should be easy to use (avoid multiple passwords)

## Supporting data (evidence/documents)



Much can be learned looking at this simple chart vs paragraphs of narrative

- provide at least three years' worth of data
- though five years will usually be more helpful to show trends
- Sometimes a ten-year display may be most helpful (i.e., the period since the school's last comp visit, for many schools)
- though things can change so significantly that information may no longer be relevant.

How many years should we cover?



Note  
 "Appendix:  
 Guidelines for  
 Understanding  
 Standard 10.3 on  
 Finances"  
 in *Standards with  
 Self-Study  
 Ideas* p 48ff

**Appendix: Guidelines for Understanding Standard 10.3 on Finances**

A Companion to the ATS Self-Study Ideas for Standard 10.3 on Financial Resources  
 (approved by the Board of Commissioners in February 2021, following consultation with a group of CFOs)

These Guidelines are referenced within the self-study ideas for Standard 10.3 on Financial Resources. These suggestions are designed to help the self-study process (school, evaluation committee, and Board of Commissioners) demonstrate and evaluate the financial equilibrium of the school. The school should consider using these guidelines and others that will help it demonstrate its own fiscal realities. The school may also want to consider using the ATS Strategic Information Report, which includes institutional data and benchmarks around a variety of important economic, enrollment, and other matters. Finally, since the evaluation committee may review the financial data provided by the school through the ATS Annual Report Form process, schools should review those data for potential elements for use in this process.

**Self-Study Idea - Standard 10.3**

**Section on Budgets and Surpluses:** The self-study should discuss how the school's budgets and operating results are "realistic" (based on reasonable revenues and expenditures in light of recent trends), "holistic" (considering the whole impact on the mission, educational quality, students, employees, donors, and other constituencies), and "sustainable" (represent operating surpluses, prudent dependence upon endowment, reserves, donors, and proper utilization of unusual or infrequent resources)—with a credible plan to address any deficiencies going forward.

**Discussion of Budgets and Surpluses:** There are a variety of ways that schools reflect "operating surpluses" in their internal financial discussions. For self-study purposes, freestanding schools should chart and then reflect on three important elements: operating surplus from their internal finances, audited change in net assets without donor restriction resulting from operations, and audited total change in net assets without donor restrictions. The chart should go back three years, include the current year, and then project forward the next two years (at least in terms of anticipated operating surpluses). Most importantly, the freestanding school should reflect on how the operating surpluses (or deficits) are impacting the school's ability to fulfill its mission and whether operations are being supported by unusual, infrequent, or unsustainable items, such as significant bequests or donations, large endowment draws, use of reserves that are depleting, student debt borrowing, or sales of property or unused items whose proceeds were used to support operations. The school should also report and reflect on overall total change in total net assets and how this supports the mission.

For embedded schools, these measures may not be as important or available; however, embedded schools should have a budget for their unit (with those numbers inserted in this chart as feasible) and reflect on the expectations that the larger entity places on the embedded school. Is the embedded school expected to generate a surplus? Are there central costs charged to the embedded school and how does this factor into the financial picture of the embedded school? How do these financial expectations impact the mission of the embedded school?

**Operating Surplus & Change in Net Assets**

Operating surplus(deficit) from internal financials  
 Change in net assets without restriction - operations  
 Total change in net assets without restriction  
 Total change in total net assets

	CY - 3	CY - 2	CY - 1	Current Yr	CY + 1	CY + 2
Operating surplus(deficit) from internal financials						
Change in net assets without restriction - operations						
Total change in net assets without restriction						
Total change in total net assets						

A school might draw from its audited statement of activities, with attention to net assets without/donor restrictions. A school might consider using ATS Strategic Information Report - Figures 1-1 to 1-4 related to Net Assets.

An idea -- Use the Appendix to present five years of organized data

## Supporting **data** (evidence/documents)

**Weak report:** *“Most of our MDiv students are placed.”*

**Good report:** *“Over the last five years our MDiv graduates have averaged a 90% placement rate, with a steady increase each year, as Table 4.1 shows.”*

**A benchmark against other peers would be helpful here**

“data crucial to understanding”

Words like “most” in a report leave the reader wondering if that means 51% or 99%?

Provide details helps the reader understand your story better

### **Peer benchmark could be built from.....**

Institutional Peer Profile

ATS Data Visualization Tool

ATS Annual Data Tables

ATS Graduating Questionnaires

(latter three on website)

### (3) Evaluation of data [objectively & honestly]

- When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan . . . Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, **‘What do these stones mean?’** tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’” (Joshua 4)
- Tell (the story) of **what the supporting data means to the school!**
- **So what???** *What can the school learn from the data??*



## Evaluation of data [objectively & honestly]

- **Weak report:** *“We try hard not to spend more than we take in.”*
- **Good report:** *“The seminary has balanced its budget four of the last five years, as Table 8.6 below demonstrates. The deficit of \$74,892 in FY21 represented only a 2.5% overage due to an unexpected need to replace a furnace. We have since established a ‘contingency fund’ for such emergencies, with a line-item budget of \$50,000 per year.”*

## Evaluation of data [objectively & honestly]

- **Weak report:** *“Morale on campus is much better.”*
- **Good report:** *“Three years ago faculty morale hit a low point when a doctrinal controversy led to the dismissal of a popular professor. The seminary followed its procedures (documented in our personnel files), but it was a very difficult time. Since then, the board and administration have worked hard to rebuild unity, with significant success—as noted in the recent faculty survey (see [2023 Faculty Survey, item #8](#)).”*

#### 4) **Recommendations** *informed by data* toward continued educational effectiveness

- Strategic
- Specific
- Succinct
- Obtainable (vs aspirational)
  
- What *next steps* will the school take *based on what it has learned*, to be more effective educationally and institutionally (achieve our mission)?

## Recommendations informed by data

- **Weak report:** *“We know more should be done to address our lack of board diversity, and we are working on that.”*
- **Good report:** *“Given our global mission and given that one fourth of our students and staff are from under-represented groups, and while no one on the board is, our trustees have set a goal of recruiting one new trustee each year from an under-represented group for the next five years until our board more fairly represents our constituency and our mission. Our first African American trustee will begin her term this fall.”*

## Recommendations informed by data

- **Weak report:** *“Enrollment has been declining dramatically. We have developed 15 initiatives to increase enrollment 15% each year until we reach 2007 enrollment levels.”*
- **Good report:** *“Given our declining enrollment, we have identified three under-served population churches within 15 miles of the school that we have developed an MOU with to offer our Master of Ministry degree at a discounted rate over the next three years.”*

## 5) In the school's **mission and context**

- **Your** mission
- **Your** context
- **Attending to these themes found throughout the *Standards***
  - Evaluation (assessment – institutional and programmatic) (Standards 1.2, Standard 2, 3.7, 3.9, 3.12, 4.0, 4.5, 4.9, 4.12, 5.0, 5.4, 5.6, 5.10, 5.16, 6.1, 6.2, 6.5, 6.8, 7.5, 8.1, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 8.10, 9.0, 9.3, 9.5, 9.6, 9.9, 10.2, 10.3)
  - Global awareness and engagement (Standards 1.4, 3.0, 3.4, 4.3, 6.7, 8.8)
  - Diversity (Standards 1.0, 1.5, 3.3, 6.7, 7.3, 7.5, 8.0, 8.2, 8.8, 9.2, 9.9, 10.1)
  - Mission (Standard 1, Standards 2.2, 2.5, 3.1, 3.6, 4.8, 4.11, 5.3, 5.9, 5.13, 7.0, 7.3, 7.10, 8.6, 8.7, 8.10, 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 10.1, 10.3, 10.5, 10.7, 10.9)

**For the dissenters who wonder –  
Why accreditation?**

## **Excursus: Why ATS accreditation?**

- Some denominations require an MDiv from an ATS school for ordination
- A MDiv degree from an ATS accredited school is *required/highly recommended* for military (and some other) chaplaincies
- Demonstrates credibility to your publics through peer review (students, donors, peer institutions)
- ATS is recognized as the “gold standard” accreditor for North American theological ed (as reported by those applying for membership)
- ATS is a “gatekeeper” to Title IV federal financial aid for ~64 schools to the tune of \$50M
- To ensure “compliance” with USDE educational expectations, whether a Title IV school or not
- ATS membership is necessary for access to some granting organizations (Lilly)
- We collaborate data and provide professional development resources for the benefit of our members!
- Five faith-based accrediting associations recognized by the USDE
  - ABHE - The Association for Biblical Higher Education, Commission on Accreditation
  - AARTS - Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, Accreditation Commission
  - AIJS - Association of Institutions of Jewish Studies
  - COA-ATS - Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools
  - TRACS - Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission

# The Self-Study Report . . .

## The specific report **structure**

### Organization and length

1. Introductory chapter
2. School synopsis
3. Main narrative
4. Concluding chapter



### Required appendixes

### Supplemental materials

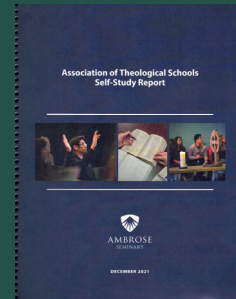


## The specific report **structure**

### Four parts of report

1. Introductory chapter (5-8 pages)
  2. School synopsis (1-2 pp)
  3. Main narrative (50-80 pp)
  4. Concluding chapter (4-5 pp)
- TOTAL 65-100 pp

Print  
and  
PDF on  
flash  
drive



Required appendixes – *PDF flash drive only*

Supplemental materials – *Online and/or Resource Room*

## Part 1. Introductory chapter (5-8 pp)

- ✓ Sets context for entire self-study report
- ✓ Title page with name of school and date of visit
- ✓ Possibly a Preface with list of abbreviations or other orienting materials
  
- ✓ Briefly introduce the school
  - ✓ mission/context/history/ecclesial-denominational commitments
  - ✓ Special qualities/programs/uniqueness of the school
- ✓ Summarize major changes since last comprehensive visit
- ✓ Review accreditation history (since last visit)
  - ✓ Including school's response to the last evaluation committee recommendations from full report
  - ✓ Any additional action items from the ATS Board of Commissioners
  
- ✓ Give overview of the design and process of the self-study process
  - ✓ Description of committee structure
  - ✓ How school involved broad participation of stakeholders in the process

Often  
written last

## Part 2. School synopsis (1-2 pp)

- 1) List all degrees (# credits, # students)
- 2) List all additional locations (% of degree)
- 3) List all modalities (onsite, online, offsite)
- 4) Number of faculty/staff (FT & PT), trustees
- 5) Relationship with any denomination(s)
- 6) List of any other accrediting agencies
- 7) Link to school's announcement about visit
- 8) Link to school's statement of accreditation
- 9) Indication of whether school participates in Title IV & gatekeeper

See *Self-Study Handbook*  
(pp 22-23) for details

Nice tables are a plus!

Often written last  
(so it is up-to-date)

## Part 3. Main narrative (50-80 pp)

5-8 pp per Standard (except 4 & 5)

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

**Include all 10 chapters, even if #5 does not apply.  
Say, "5. Doctoral Degrees: The school has no doctoral  
programs."**

## Main narrative (50-80 pp)

3-5 pp per degree program

### 4. Master's Degrees (unpack)

4.1-5 Master of Divinity

4.6-9 Master of Arts [each MA program, identify academic and/or professional oriented]

4.10-12 Master of Theology (ThM/STM)

### 5. Doctoral Degrees (unpack)

5.1-6 Doctor of Ministry

5.7-10 Other Professional Dr [each professional doc program]

5.11-16 Doctor of Philosophy / Theology [each academic doc program]

If more than one MA or Professional Doctorate, the Self-Study may discuss them together or separately, depending on degree structure. If one of these six groupings is not offered, indicate that in the report (e.g., "The school does not offer the ThM, so Standards 4.10-12 are not applicable.") NOTE: See *Self-Study Handbook*, p. 23.

## Chapter tips . . .

### Remember the 5 Keys!

- 1) Sufficient **description** – *what resources support us meeting this Standard?*
- 2) Supporting **data** (evidence/documents) – *what evidence demonstrates us meeting this Standard?*
- 3) **Evaluation** of data – *what assessment of this evidence has taken place?*
- 4) Informed **recommendations** – *what strategic recommendations would improve our alignment with this Standard?*

*Remember: In the school's mission & context.*

Refer to the  
*Standards with Self-  
Study Ideas!*

Ensure you address the  
“requirements” (coming up)

End each chapter with an  
INFORMED brief summary of  
strengths, areas for needed  
growth, and recommendations  
for next steps!

## Chapter tips . . .

### Some Key Words:

For example . . .

This is  
evidenced by . . .

See document  
[xyz] . . .

For instance . . .

Another  
example is . . .

Tell your school's story of  
how it works and why  
(not merely description!)

Write for the Reader  
(BOC) who will have only  
the SS and Appendix  
to read!!

## Part 4. Concluding chapter (4-5 pp)

- ✓ Summarize overall findings of the self-study; what has school learned?
- ✓ Organize and **prioritize** strengths to be sustained
- ✓ Organize and **prioritize** concerns or areas needing improvement toward greater educational effectiveness
  - If the self-study has concluded the school is at risk of not meeting, does not fully meet, or does not meet one or more of the Standards – describe how the school is already implementing a credible plan to meet the Standard in the near future
- ✓ Organize and **prioritize** recommendations that have emerged in the self-study process and how the school plans to continue its process of self-evaluation through the next period of accreditation

Perhaps 4-7,  
not 40-70  
See p 23 of SS HB



## Required appendices

- Limited to these seven (or eight) Appendices
  - Bookmarked, single PDF file on flash drive (no hard copy)
1. Current organizational chart, showing names and titles
  2. Current strategic plan(s)
  3. Current evaluation plan(s) (summarize results in report)
  4. Current budget (if embedded, just unit) and a 3-5-year budget plan
  5. Most recent fiscal year audit (and management letter, if one)
  6. Handbooks: Board, faculty, staff, and student
  7. Academic catalog (include as bookmarked PDF)
  8. US Title IV documentation (if applicable)

Remember, you may elect to link to numerous documents and websites to amplify and support your narrative text but limit your Appendices to these items.

## Supplemental materials

- See pp 25 of SS HB for list of other items (e.g., syllabi, minutes, CVs, publications, promotional materials, etc.)
- School may choose to make these available in format they prefer -- PW protected web page, USB drive, file-share, hard copies in Resource Room, etc.

Suggestion – make some materials available electronically at the time the self-study is submitted, and provide a “space” (electronic folder) where additional materials requested by the committee can be added

- **ENSURE THEY ARE READILY ACCESSIBLE!!**  
**»AVOID COMPLICATED TECHNOLOGY!!**

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A. LINKS TO ATS RESOURCES FOR SELF-STUDY

The following resources are available on the [ats.edu](https://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](#)

# A NEW Appendix A Resource Links

**A NEW  
Appendix B**

**REQUIRED for US Title IV  
Participants**

(whether ATS is the “gatekeeper”  
or another agency)

## Title IV School 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* in the seven Standards listed below.
- **INCLUDE EVIDENCE of state, NC-SARA, etc. authority to operate and confer degrees for all locations! (Standard 1.6)**

### Info

- ATS is the Title IV “gatekeeper” for ~62 member schools
- Accessing about \$43M in federal financial aid in AY 2021
- About 1/3 of ATS 280 school are not Title IV participants (30 in Canada)

# Title IV School Participants

## 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.

### 34 CFR 600.2 "Credit hour:"

*Credit hour:* Except as provided in 34 CFR 668.8(k) and (l), a credit hour is an amount of student work defined by an institution, as approved by the institution's accrediting agency or State approval agency, that is consistent with commonly accepted practice in postsecondary education and that -

- (1) Reasonably approximates not less than -
  - (i) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different period of time; or
  - (ii) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1)(i) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours; and
- (2) Permits an institution, in determining the amount of work associated with a credit hour, to take into account a variety of delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels.

## Title IV School Participants

### 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.

### 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.

### 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 for campus security and fire safety.

### 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.

National avg is 7.3%  
ATS avg around 4%

39

## Title IV School Participants

### 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.

### 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 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).



### III. PRODUCES RESULTS

- It tells your story well
- The visiting evaluation committee says, “we understand this school”
- The school says, “they understand us”

Which in turn leads to progress toward . . .

- 1) **Internal** goals – identified issues and strategic planning to address issues for greater effectiveness
- 2) **External** goals – demonstrated educational quality to (ATS) peers and quality assurance to public(s)
- 3) **Eternal** goals – clearer fulfillment of your school’s mission

*Thank you!!*

Your liaison is an available resource to answer questions and clarify the self-study process!