

# Of peer review, kinship, and the right use of gifts

BY BARBARA MUTCH

*When the ground is safely kept,  
when the scale is right, and when  
the resident human mind  
is righted by memory, affection,  
neighborly kindness and care,  
the giving of hands to work,  
all lives of woodland and pasture  
live by the economy of gifts,  
the only economy that will last.  
To be in one's right mind  
is to know the right use of gifts.*

—“A Small Porch in the Woods (22)”  
A Small Porch, Wendell Berry



Peer reviewers know the right use of gifts. Prompted by the opportunity to give back and responding in gratitude for what they have received from others, approximately 150 individuals serve as peer reviewers on evaluation visits to ATS member schools each year.

Every ATS member school is periodically required to conduct a self-study, submit a self-study report, and host a comprehensive evaluation visit by a committee of peer and public reviewers to maintain its accreditation. Comprehensive evaluation committees have at least one administrator, one educator, and (for schools that participate in US federal student aid programs) one ministry practitioner. Over the last decade, more than 550 persons have “given their hands to the work” of seeking the enhancement and improvement of theological schools and spend approximately 80 hours each in preparation, participation, and putting “pen to paper.” Peer reviewers have expertise in graduate theological education (or in related vocations), reflect the diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and faith communities present in all member schools, and know how to work

collaboratively and effectively with other committee members.

For Shively Smith, assistant professor of New Testament and director of the PhD program at Boston University School of Theology, serving as a peer reviewer is an expression of her commitment to the work of theological education and an act that connects her to the larger landscape of theological education across North America. She sees peer review as a “friend-making process” in which peer reviewers find ways to listen and share across institutional locations and professional experiences to help one another live out their respective missions and values. She claims peer review service as one of the best things she did upon entering the academy, gaining multiple resources through her service that have contributed to her growth as an educator, scholar, colleague, administrator, and person.



Shively Smith

Smith describes herself as deeply committed to the power of presence and kinship in the work of theological education, and she experiences peer review as another form of that commitment to listening and kinship.

“Peer review means meeting new ‘friends’—be it other human beings or institutions—that I would not have had a relationship or investment in if it was not for the composition and work of the visiting teams,” she said. “As a peer reviewer, you do a lot of listening in service to the shared work of theological education and its diverse constituencies . . . I am grounded in what it means to see, embrace, and protect the integrity of our industry’s many diversities in a way that affirms all of us can yet serve alongside each other.”



Felix Cortez-Valles

Felix Cortez-Valles, professor of New Testament at Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University, considers service as a peer reviewer to be both a privilege and a great responsibility.

“It is a privilege because it provides the opportunity to

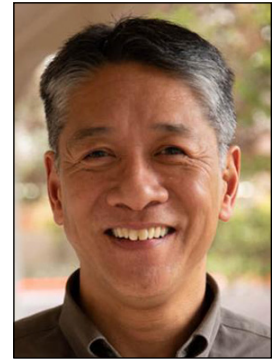
learn from what other schools do to achieve their educational goals and it is a great responsibility to provide an objective, careful analysis that schools can use to improve their education and institutional health,” he said. Participation on an evaluation committee provides Cortez-Valles with the opportunity to contribute to the work of theological education beyond the walls of his institution and the lives of his students, allowing him to be generous with his time, knowledge, and experience. In the end, he says he receives more than he gives.

“Observing others is one of the best ways to understand myself and my institution, forcing me to evaluate my own educational strategies, to be honest about their effectiveness, and to gain a window into new possibilities,” said

Cortez-Valles. He sees one of the greatest surprises of his experience as a peer reviewer to be witnessing the diversity and creativity of the theological institutions in North America.

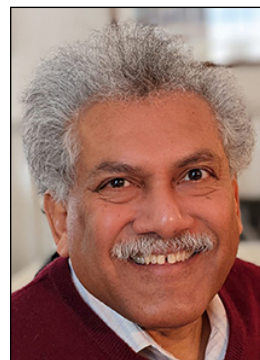
“That diversity gives me hope that we will find solutions to the common and ever evolving challenges we face,” he said.

Derek Chinn, former dean of Multnomah Biblical Seminary of Multnomah University and professor of pastoral ministry, finds such service to be an encouraging growth experience providing insight into ways his own school can improve. In addition, he finds it to be “oddly comforting” to see how peer institutions face shared challenges.



Derek Chinn

Jayakiran Sebastian, dean and H. George Anderson Professor of Mission and Cultures at United Lutheran Seminary, finds service as a peer reviewer to offer the twin opportunities to “learn and unlearn.”



Jayakiran Sebastian

“You *learn* so much from reading the very many documents . . . as well as the on-site interaction with members of your team and a cross-section of people from the institution under review, and you *unlearn* some of the ‘givens’ and ways of doing things that you assumed were the norm

because of your own location and experiences in your home institution,” he said.

Furthering the notion of peer review as an act of kinship, Sebastian recognizes that “we are not alone . . . but we are part of a much wider body of people there to help

us do the good things that we are doing with enhanced capability, accountability, and transparency.”

Smith agreed. “You begin to see yourself as a participant in a more extensive history and work standing alongside others,” she said. “That shared commitment, community,

and vocation provide ballast in our field's unexpected and fast-changing horizons.”

For more information about participating as a peer reviewer, contact your school’s ATS staff liaison.



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