

SELF-STUDY HANDBOOK
CHAPTER TWO

*Guidelines for Conducting
an Institutional Self-Study*

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Introduction

A self-study is the primary activity by which an institution prepares for a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. It is a process by which an institution comprehensively reviews itself through the normative perspective of the Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”). The primary activities of this review are evaluation and assessment. The study results in a report that should serve the institution, the accreditation evaluation committee, and the Board of Commissioners (“Board”). This chapter of the *Self-Study Handbook* provides guidance to schools undertaking a self-study in terms of (1) the overall purposes of the self-study, (2) the primary work of the self-study, (3) recommended procedures for conducting a self-study, and (4) expectations of the Board of Commissioners regarding the final self-study report.

Purpose of the Self-Study

An institutional self-study should serve many purposes. Generally, each school’s planning should include these three purposes of self-study: institutional evaluation, institutional planning, and preparation for external review.

Institutional Evaluation

The self-study process provides both the occasion and the perspective to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of a school, that is, its educational programs and institutional activities. Evaluation is described as a fourfold process in the Standards. Because evaluation is a central feature of the Standards and the self-study process, it is described briefly in this chapter and at length in Chapter Five of the *Handbook*, “Guidelines for Using the Commission Standards in Institutional Evaluation.” Good evaluation involves analyzing information so that value judgments can be made about the merit, integrity, or appropriateness of particular educational or institutional activities. The self-study is a process by which the various constituencies of a school can evaluate its efforts to enhance its practices and programs.

Institutional Planning

Planning is a process by which institutions review and undertake to improve their lives. It involves making decisions about what new activities should be undertaken, what activities should be abandoned in order to apply scarce resources to other activities, 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 institution to review and revise its strategic plans.

Evaluation and planning, of course, are activities that good institutions pursue on an ongoing basis. The self-study does not introduce these activities once every 10 years, but it brings both into a particular focus. A good self-study report describes the results of the institution's self-evaluation and the implementation of decisions based on that evaluation through a comprehensive institutional and educational plan. Self-studies that accomplish these purposes require thoughtful and broad-based work, and they serve the institution very well—regardless of the findings of an evaluation committee.

Preparation for External Review

Although the process of self-study serves several internal purposes, the self-study report itself also addresses an external audience. Because the report is the primary means by which the institution presents itself for external review, the final report should give the accreditation evaluation committee a good description of the ways in which the school first gathers and organizes appropriate information, then goes about its evaluation based on that information, and finally uses the findings of its evaluative efforts in institutional planning and educational programming.

The 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 an institution and its programs according to the Standards is incomplete. The report should demonstrate that the school engages in an ongoing process of self-study that reflects the extensive cycle of evaluative activities that constitute, in part, the basis for granting accredited status (i.e., evaluation, planning, etc.). Institutions 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.

Because the external committee is required to prepare its report on the basis of the Standards, the self-study process and report should

demonstrate specifically how the institution meets the Standards. If a school discovers that it does not implement a Standard appropriately, then the self-study process should provide recommendations for changes necessary to implement the Standard in the school's institutional or educational activities.

The Primary Task of Institutional Self-Study: Evaluation

While higher education accreditation has always involved evaluation of institutions, its most recent emphasis, reflected in the Standards, refocuses accreditation on the schools' own practices of evaluating their institutional and educational effectiveness. As a result, evaluation should have a central place in both the self-study process and the report. Evaluation is described in the *General Institutional Standards* in the following terms:

. . . Evaluation is a process that includes (1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance; (2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals; (3) the assessment of the performance of the program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on this assessment. . . . (Standard 1, section 1.2.2).

This description of the evaluation process also provides a model for understanding how a self-study should be conducted.

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

Once goals are properly established, the institution needs to identify the kind of **information** it will need in order to assess the attainment of those goals. Institutions that are functioning according to the Standards will have systems of information-gathering in place and, in the context of the self-study, should review comprehensively the information that has been collected. This review will involve questions like: (1) *Is the right kind of information being collected?* (2) *Is the information collected in usable forms?* and (3) *Does the school use the information effectively in the evaluation process?* For schools that have not developed an overall process of information-gathering, the self-study will focus on different questions: (1) *What kinds of information should be collected?* and (2) *What institutional systems will be necessary for collecting this information?* Because these schools need to make evaluative judgments about their efforts, even if they have not developed a comprehensive system of information-gathering, they will need to begin the work of the self-study by auditing all information that is available to determine what available data will inform the evaluative focus of the self-study and what will need to be gathered.

Assessment is the task of analyzing and interpreting the information that has been collected. It involves the question: *To what extent, and in what ways, have the goals been attained?* Information alone, no matter how rich or sophisticated, cannot answer this question. The important goals in theological education are complex and require judgment and reflection based on reasonable patterns of information. Using the available information, self-study subcommittees should assess the quality of an area of concern by reflecting on the ways in which, and the extent to which, the institution is achieving its goals.

The final phase of the evaluation process involves **making decisions** about the goals and the activities that have been devised to achieve the goals. Interpretation in the assessment phase may lead to the conclusion that a goal was attained, but that, in the final analysis, it was not or is no longer a worthy goal. In this case, attention turns to the ways in which the goal should be altered or abandoned in favor of a more appropriate one. Assessment may lead to the conclusion that a central and important goal has not been attained, and attention then turns to the ways in which the activities designed to achieve the goal should be revised. The assessment phase may also lead to the conclusion that the goal and the activities are appropriate, but the kind of

information that has been collected does not serve the assessment process well or sufficiently. In this case, attention turns to the development of more appropriate or comprehensive methods of gathering information. In the context of the self-study, these deliberations typically lead to proposals for goals, program development, or information gathering that become recommendations in the self-study.

The description of evaluation in the Standards was not written merely as a direction for conducting the self-study but is meant to guide institutional behavior more broadly. Self-study, however, is a particular activity of accredited schools that is, fundamentally, an evaluative activity, and this definition of the evaluation process is instructive. The work of the self-study involves more than evaluation, but evaluation is central. The Board of Commissioners requires accreditation evaluation committees to evaluate the self-study. While accreditation is not based on the quality of self-studies, a school's inability to conduct an evaluative self-study may be evidence of a more pervasive inability to function according to the expectations of the Standards.

Conducting the Self-Study

Good self-studies reflect appropriate decisions by institutions regarding the conduct of the study. Conducting a self-study involves the development of an organizational structure for the study, including the identification of working groups and key roles to be filled by individuals, the establishment of a timetable, and the development of an approval process for the final self-study report.

Organizational Structure for the Self-Study

No one design is the "correct" one for this task; any organization of the process that accomplishes the work effectively and enables the institution to achieve the purposes of the self-study described above is appropriate and acceptable. However structured, though, the study should evaluate the institution and its programs in terms of each of the institutional, general educational, and relevant Degree Program Standards. If an institution receives permission from Commission staff to host a joint, coordinated, or concurrent visit, including permission to write a combined self-study report, that report must contain a chart or table showing on what exact pages in the combined report each Commission Standard is addressed.

The work is done, almost always, by a steering committee and several subcommittees. Along with these groups, two individuals are crucial to the success of the study: the director of the self-study, who typically chairs the steering committee, and the editor of the self-study report.

The **steering committee** guides the self-study by supervising the process and the development of a coherent report. The committee should be representative of all or most of the constituencies that compose the school: students, faculty, administration, staff, and, when available, alumni/ae and trustees. Responsibilities of the steering committee include the following:

1. Initiating the self-study by developing its design, organizing the committee structure, developing task assignments for each subcommittee, and determining the overall schedule for the study.
2. Overseeing the conduct of the study through activities such as monitoring the progress of the subcommittees and providing support for their work as appropriate, mediating questions of overlapping issues among subcommittees, and developing editorial guidelines for the drafts of subcommittee reports.
3. Developing and overseeing the stages of review, revision, and approval, including a procedure for reviewing drafts of subcommittee reports; a process whereby constituencies participating in aspects of the self-study can react to the evaluation, proposals, and recommendations generated by the self-study; and a process of ensuring institutional support for the final report, including acceptance of the report, prior to submission to the Board of Commissioners, by the governing board or its executive committee.
4. Assisting with the development of a plan for follow-up and the implementation of the self-study recommendations.

The steering committee should guide the self-study with care, ensuring that the process approaches evaluation through the perspective of the Standards (and those of a regional accrediting body if the self-study is conducted for a joint evaluation). The steering committee should also review the school's accreditation history and ensure that the self-study addresses concerns raised in the context of the previous comprehensive evaluation as well as accreditation-related issues that have emerged since that last review.

Much of the work of the self-study will be completed by **subcommittees** that have been assigned to work in specific areas. 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. Working from the specific charge or task assignment prepared by the steering committee, each subcommittee is responsible for evaluating those aspects of the institution related to the Standards assigned to it. It does this by reviewing the goals or purposes related to its area of study, identifying the data that can inform its evaluation, assessing the extent to which the school is accomplishing its purposes or goals with regard to the subcommittee's particular area of study, and developing recommendations regarding revised goals, revised procedures related to existing goals, or the development of more effective patterns of ongoing information gathering.

The number of subcommittees will depend both on the design of the self-study and on the size and complexity of the institution. An institution will need to decide if self-study tasks should be added to the mandates of existing institutional committees or if a special self-study committee structure should be established. Schools should determine what size the subcommittee structure should have. In some large institutions, a different subcommittee may focus on each Standard. In other institutions, the Standards may be grouped into categories for both the study process and the report. Although the Board of Commissioners does not recommend any particular patterns, the Standards lend themselves to being considered in the following ways:

For small 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 major subcommittees.

1. The Standards on Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation (1), Institutional Integrity (2), Authority and Governance (7), and Institutional Resources (8) address a broad area of institutional issues and concerns.
2. The Standards on The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research (3), Library and Information Resources (4), Faculty (5), and Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, and Placement

(6) can be grouped together so the primary activities of a theological school (teaching, learning, and research) are considered in the context of the primary participants in those activities (faculty, students, and library).

3. The Standard on educational expectations relevant to all degree programs (ES) and the individual Degree Program Standards (A–J) comprise the formal educational program of a theological school.

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 six subcommittees.

1. The Standards on Purpose, Planning, and Evaluation (1), Institutional Integrity (2), and Authority and Governance (7) could be assigned to one subcommittee.
2. The Standard on educational expectations relevant to all degree programs (ES) and the relevant Degree Program Standards (A–J) provide a focus on the theological school's educational programs. Depending on the range of degree programs, a school could divide this work among two or more subcommittees.
3. The Standard on Institutional Resources (8) is comprehensive and, given the pressure on finances in theological schools and the broad range of resource issues, might benefit from being the primary focus of a single subcommittee.
4. The Standards on The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research (3), Library and Information Resources (4), and Faculty (5) might provide a viable combination to focus on the overall academic life of the institution.
5. Because larger schools often have larger and more diverse student bodies, with greater student services, the Standard on Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, and Placement (6) represents a variety of concerns that could be the focus of a subcommittee.

Regardless of its assigned area, each subcommittee should focus its work using the general evaluative model described above, and more fully in Chapter Five of this *Handbook*, and understand that its work is contributing to a comprehensive evaluation of the institution.

Two roles of the self-study typically are assigned to individuals rather than committees. 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 institution, and the ability to facilitate a complex task. Because the director is required to ask a variety of persons to do a variety of tasks, he or she should be authorized by the institution in ways to ensure cooperation and support. The **editor of the final report** brings the various committee reports, background materials, exhibits, and appendices into a coherent and usable institutional report that should serve the needs of the school, the accreditation evaluation committee, and the Board. 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.

Scheduling the Work of the Self-Study

A minimum of one full academic year will be needed to design the self-study process, to establish the committees, to engage in the research, to reflect on the findings, and to produce a unified and comprehensive report. Most often, the entire process will occupy two academic years, although the various subcommittees will be engaged for only part of that time. A typical two-year schedule could include the following sequence of activities:

Year 1, First Term: At least two years before the visit, the ATS Commission office will invite the school to send up to two people to a self-study workshop at the ATS office in Pittsburgh. Following the workshop, the steering committee should be appointed, and during this term it should work with those who attended the self-study workshop to familiarize itself with the ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation, plan the organizational structure for the study, develop the subcommittee structure, write task assignments for the subcommittees, develop an overall timetable for the study, and appoint members to the subcommittees.

Year 1, Second Term: The subcommittees begin their work with the oversight of the steering committee. The goal is to have a first draft of their reports by early in the next term.

Year 2, First Term: Early this term, subcommittees submit first drafts of their reports to the steering committee. The steering committee reviews reports in the context of the study as a whole, identifies concerns, lacunae, or issues that should be addressed during the final half of the study, and advises the subcommittees as appropriate. During this term, the subcommittees complete their work and submit their final reports to the steering committee. The steering committee reviews the reports and establishes a process for review and negotiation of the subcommittee reports.

Year 2, Second Term: The steering committee solicits responses to the final subcommittee reports and begins preparation of a unified institutional evaluation and set of recommendations. The editor works on the drafts of the various institutional reports. The steering committee guides the final review and approval process.

At least 60 days before the visit, the report is completed and submitted to the ATS Commission office in anticipation of the visit of an accreditation evaluation committee in the next term. Please note that an evaluation visit for initial accreditation requires authorization from the Board of Commissioners prior to the evaluation based on a review of the self-study report, which means self-study reports for initial accreditation must be submitted by April 1 for fall visits and by December 1 for spring visits. A school should develop its schedule to fit the accreditation schedule, needs, and work patterns of the institution. The schedule should also provide adequate time to conduct the self-study satisfactorily in the context of the school's other work, which continues during the self-study.

Institutional Adoption of the Report of the Self-Study

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 institution in the context of its strategic planning, appropriate constituencies within the institution should have the opportunity to participate in a process of review and endorsement of the final report of the self-study. Faculty and administrators are crucial to this process, as is the governing board. The 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 support. The governing board, or

its executive committee, should take formal action to receive the self-study report 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.

The Self-Study Report

The self-study report is the written account of the study including its process, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The Board 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, the final report has several purposes. It demonstrates the institution's ability to analyze its effectiveness and develop plans for its own improvement. It also provides evidence of the way in which the institution is functioning from the perspective of the Standards. Finally, it provides the basis for the work of the accreditation evaluation committee and informs the accrediting decisions made by the Board of Commissioners.

General Characteristics

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 institution 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. Evaluation, as noted previously in this chapter of the *Handbook*, is central. It is the major task of the self-study and should feature prominently in the self-study report. Finally, reports

should clearly identify the **recommendations** that the institution has developed as a result of the self-study. The recommendations should inform the institution's strategic plan and reflect serious intent of the school. They should also clearly indicate how the school will meet the Standards if there are instances where the self-study evaluation concludes that the school does not sufficiently embody them.

An early 1990s study of self-studies identified some characteristics that were present in good reports and some characteristics of reports that were judged to be weak or inadequate.

Good self-study reports have several features in common. First, they have a coherent pattern of organization that clearly, but not rigidly, relates the material in the report to each Standard. When a report is being prepared for a joint Commission-regional committee, the report should cross-index material so Standards of both accrediting bodies are clearly identified and referenced. Second, good reports describe the process of the self-study so readers understand the activities of the study that resulted in the evaluation and recommendations it reports. The report should present the data that are crucial to understanding the issues in as clear and concise a manner as possible, including effective use of tables and figures. Longer or more complex summaries of data, such as financial reports, library figures, institutional statistics, results of surveys, and other studies conducted as part of the larger self-study, should be included in a supplemental section of appendices.

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 been unwilling or unable to identify the most critical elements of its review or the most crucial of its recommendations. 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 institution, and the institutional capacity to be objective and honest in its self-evaluation.

Weak or inadequate self-study reports are often overly descriptive, not evaluative, and too lengthy. They lack a coherent organizational structure or fail to implement the organization the report professes to have. Self-study reports that fail to provide the evidence that supports the study's findings or that offer conclusions that appear not to be based on meaningful information are not helpful for evaluation committee members or the Board of Commissioners. Reports that fail to evaluate the institution thoughtfully and carefully in the context of the Standards are not useful and will be judged accordingly.

In general, the report should provide a readable and useful description of the institution, the self-study process, the evaluation of the school in terms of the Standards, and conclusions and recommendations emerging from the process. It 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 evaluate the institution's self-study report as part of the committee's report.

Structure of the Report

While institutions should present their reports in a manner suited to their studies and plans for the future use of the reports, every report must contain some common elements: (1) an introductory chapter that reviews the school's accreditation history and describes the process of the self-study, (2) a main narrative that reports the study's evaluation with reference to the Standards, and (3) a concluding chapter that presents an overall summary of the institution's self-evaluation and outlines its plans for internal follow-up on the self-study recommendations. In addition, it may be appropriate to include some reference or background information as appendices.

Introductory Chapter. This chapter should describe the background and context of the self-study. It should review the school's accreditation history and interactions with the Board since the last comprehensive evaluation. In the context of this review, it should describe institutional responses to the last accreditation committee evaluations and to actions of the Board. The introduction should give an overview of the design and process of the self-study, including the committee

structure and efforts to gain broad participation in the process, and identify any special features of the self-study that will help the reading of the report by the accreditation committee and the Board. This chapter should also summarize major changes or developments in the school since the last comprehensive evaluation and describe the organization of the report. Finally, the introduction should orient the readers to the special qualities, programs, or structures of the school. The better informed evaluation committees and the Commissioners are about the school and its unique characteristics, the better able they will be to evaluate the institution in terms of its own mission and purposes.

Main Narrative of the Report. The body of the report should include a chapter on each of the eight General Institutional Standards, a chapter that covers relevant sections of the Educational Standard, and chapters on each applicable Degree Program Standard. There is no need to discuss parts of the Educational Standard that do not apply to the school (e.g., extension education or distance education, if not offered); likewise, there is no need to discuss Degree Program Standards that the school does not offer. The various chapters of the report should be written with one unified, institutional voice with an appropriate balance between description and evaluation. The ATS website contains additional resources on writing self-study reports, including the importance of how the three parts of the Standards relate to one another.

Concluding Chapter. The final chapter or section, like the introductory one, should include certain elements, regardless of the variations an institution may choose for the main narrative. It should summarize the overall findings of the study and organize the recommendations contained in the various parts of the report into a common set with assigned priorities. In anticipation of the action of the Board of Commissioners, this chapter should clearly identify the following: (1) the strengths of the institution that should be sustained as the school grows and develops; (2) 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 institution does not meet one or more of the Standards and how it has already implemented a credible plan to come into compliance with them in the near future. Finally, the

conclusion should describe how the institution plans to continue the ongoing process of evaluation, based on the model described in the Standards and reflecting the one it has used.

Appendices and Supplemental Material. Every self-study is based on more sources of information than should or could be included with the main narrative of the report. The steering committee should refer to Chapter Three of the *Self-Study Handbook* (pp. 16-18) for a list of what to include in the appendices and what supplemental material to include in the Documents Room (physical or virtual).

Submission and Distribution

The school is responsible for submitting and distributing copies of the self-study report according to policies of the Board of Commissioners, which are outlined in the Guidelines Regarding Comprehensive Evaluation Logistics, appended to Chapter 3 of this *Handbook*.

For institutions seeking *initial accreditation*, Board policy requires the Board to evaluate the self-study prior to authorizing an initial accreditation evaluation. Two copies of the completed self-study report must be sent to the Commission office 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. The due dates for submission of self-study reports prepared for an initial accreditation evaluation are April 1 for the June meeting of the Board of Commissioners and December 1 for the February meeting.

Consultation Resources

The Board of Commissioners sponsors workshops for schools engaged in self-study. Because institutional 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 in self-study, including a review of an outline of the self-study and counsel regarding its format and adequacy in relation to the Standards.