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# Prepare Your Library for an ATS Accreditation Visit

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**ABSTRACT:** When an institution is preparing for an ATS Accreditation visit, the library needs to prepare as well. This article provides a brief history of how the new Standards of Accreditation were created in 2020, including the philosophy guiding the standards. It outlines ways to prepare a library that covers Standard 6, which is the library standard. In the article, a reader learns how to collect data, write the narrative for Standard 6, and provide the evaluation team with conclusions and recommendations.

Welcome to the world of accreditation. Sometimes, accreditation has a bad reputation, or people groan when they hear the word accreditation, but accreditation intends to help ensure students receive a quality education. As educators and librarians, we invest in students and want them to grow during their time at our institutions. So, being a good partner with administration, faculty, and others in institutions regarding accreditation is an innovative and strategic move.

This article has three goals. The first goal is for you to be more acquainted with the *ATS Standards of Accreditation (2020)*, particularly Standard 6, which is the library standard. Second is to have concrete ideas on how to write for Standard 6. The final goal is to learn how accreditation can be simple and logical so you can be a resource and leader in your institution on this topic.

In 2000, ATS reviewed and revised its existing standards. The U.S. Department of Education requires accreditation agencies to review their standards on a regular basis. The old standards had grown exponentially due to the emergence of online education and

master's degrees within theological education. The old standards had ten basic standards, ten educational standards, and degree program standards (one for each of the degree programs the school offered). Therefore, the time was ripe to review and revise the ATS standards.

The ATS staff member who led this review was Dr. Debbie Creamer, a fellow librarian who left Iliff School of Theology to work at ATS.<sup>1</sup> This work was comprehensive and broad-reaching. Debbie and the librarian member of the ATS standards redevelopment task force, Mitzi Budde, came to an Atla Annual asking for input on the standards. At that point in time, no guarantee existed that a separate standard for libraries would be included in the new standards, or that libraries would be mentioned at all in the new standards. Partially due to the theological librarians' input, a separate library standard remained in the new standards. The result of this multi-year process was that ten new standards passed unanimously by the ATS membership.

The new standards are principle-based and focus on educational quality, accreditation clarity, and contextualized flexibility compared to the old standards, which were more prescriptive. However, neither the old standards and nor new standards are compliance-based on. For example, many regional accreditation agencies' standards are compliance-based, meaning when the accreditors come to visit, they mark items with either a *yes* or *no*. Institutions either follow the standards (are compliant), or not. In other words, an institution fits within a specific box, whether it is a stand-alone or embedded school.

The new standards seek in all ways to embody the ATS mission "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public" (Association of Theological Schools, n.d.) and the ATS Commission purpose "to contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools" (Association of Theological Schools, n.d.). Accreditation is a voluntary process through which schools mutually assure one another's educational quality with an eye toward ongoing improvement based on standards.

These standards articulate principles of quality for graduate theological education that all schools meet in various ways. The principles can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In other words, no one way exists to demonstrate how your institution is achieving

a principle. Each school has a right way in its unique context, and no one answer exists for over 240 ATS institutions.

Standard 6.10 states “the library provides environments conducive to learning and scholarly research, with appropriate agreements for its contracted or consortial resources” (Association of Theological Schools 2020, 10). This standard represents a principle of quality agreed upon as an element of theological education. However, how each institution achieves this principle of quality is left to the institution. The purpose of the narrative and evidence in the self-study is to demonstrate how a particular library in a specific institution achieves this principle of quality in its context. A standalone school library delivering only online degrees might provide a different environment conducive to learning compared to an embedded divinity school within a university structure. The blessing and freedom of principle-based standards is the ability of each institution to fulfill its mission within broad boundaries agreed upon by ATS members or their peers.

ATS accreditation is based on peer reviewers. Peers (the ATS membership) formed the committee to review the standards. Peers are members of all ATS evaluation teams. Peers are colleagues wanting each institution to deliver the highest quality of theological education in its particular context.

To help institutions grasp the new principle-based standards, the preamble to the new standards describes the purpose of accreditation well: “Accreditation is about quality assurance for various publics and ongoing improvement for theological schools, especially regarding student learning and formation” (Association of Theological Schools 2020, ii). Instead of skipping over this section, please take a few moments to read through it. Sections include standards and membership priorities, standards and their purposes, and standards and their interpretation. It is excellent!

Additionally, ATS created a helpful resource called *Standards of Accreditation (with Self-Study Ideas)* (Association of Theological Schools 2024). In the self-study ideas, they give examples of how to achieve the principle of quality based on context. When writing to this standard, refer to these ideas. These ideas are not the only way to provide evidence of how your institution is achieving the principles of quality—they are suggestions, not requirements.

Standard 6.1 lays out the library purpose and connection to the institutional mission: “The library has a clear statement that identifies its purpose and role in the school and the ways it contributes to achieving the school’s educational mission. The library’s purpose statement forms the foundation for evaluating library and information services” (Association of Theological Schools 2020, 10). A school might demonstrate its engagement with this standard by describing its purpose statement and explaining how (and by whom) it was developed, adopted, and distributed. It might explain how this statement connects with the school’s overall mission and the context of its stakeholders. The self-study might also discuss how this statement serves as a foundation for the library’s evaluation processes. If the library serves more than just the graduate theological school (e.g., a university library or a consortial library), the self-study might show how the statement helps the library give sufficient attention to the graduate theological program and the specific needs of its students and faculty.

A few points about assessment in relation to the library need to be made, especially regarding principle-based standards. You and your library staff need to develop the criteria by which the library will be evaluated, find ways to measure the achievement of those criteria, use the results to make further improvements, and begin the cycle again.

Perhaps it is obvious but still worth emphasizing: address the standard, even when (as in 6.10), it almost feels like two standards put together. One part is concerned with patron access to learning environments, while the second part is concerned with patron access to learning resources. Both the learning environments and learning resources could address both the physical and the virtual/digital. The point is to address the standard. Sometimes, an excellent way to do that is to use keywords and phrases from the standard as a way of assuring the reader that you have read and understood the standard. More importantly, if it is a compound standard with two or three aspects to it, make sure to address all of them.

Now, you are ready to demonstrate (provide evidence) how your library is achieving the standards when you write the self-study. What data do you have to provide proof? Libraries collect lots of data, but how much data is used and useful? One way to demonstrate evidence

is to match data collection to the ATS standards, which is a method learned and presented by Dr. Timothy Lincoln. Lincoln's yearly library survey questions matched the standards as articulated in Standard 6. (On your annual library survey of users, you can ask them if the library is providing an environment conducive to... and provide a five-point Likert scale.) Once this process is started, depending on where the library is in the accreditation cycle, two to three years or five years of data showing evidence of the library achieving this standard can be available—thus demonstrating evidence.

Additionally, provide open-ended questions on this annual library survey question. Ask users how the library offers this environment. Then, these user statements are utilized by adding them to the narrative of the self-study, demonstrating (again, providing evidence) that the library is achieving this standard within the context. Many libraries survey all students once a year, and faculty are surveyed every three years.

A second source of data is the ATS entering and exiting surveys called ESQ and GSQ. These surveys have one question divided into two parts related to the library already built into the primary survey. Additionally, an institution can petition ATS to add additional library questions to these surveys.

Standard 2.6 outlines the evaluation process for accreditation:

Evaluation is a simple, systematic, and sustained process that (a) identifies key educational and institutional outcomes (including learning outcomes for each degree program); (b) systematically and regularly gathers evidence related to each outcome (with a mixture of direct and indirect measures and quantitative and qualitative data); (c) engages appropriate stakeholders (especially faculty for educational outcomes) on a sustained basis to analyze and reflect upon how well the evidence indicates that each educational and institutional outcome is being achieved; and (d) uses those analyses and reflections for educational and institutional improvement. (Association of Theological Schools 2020, 2.)

Sometimes, schools get anxious over accreditation and fill their self-study with too much data, which is overwhelming to the visiting committee. Or the data points are not interconnected or do not show a change based on the data. Find the balance between too little and too much data—make it simple, systematic, and sustainable.

In the old standards, one standard was on diversity. In the new standards, diversity is woven throughout the standards so that diversity can be mentioned in almost all the standards. Sometimes, schools use the library as a touch point for diversity. But as the evaluation standards say, think about how the diversity of services and collections are related to student diversity, faculty diversity, and curriculum diversity. Be creative with your colleagues when writing the self-study. Do not let the library be the only place for diversity within your context. Diversity was of such significant value that the ATS membership voted on these standards with diversity woven throughout them, demonstrating that diversity is woven throughout the institution.

Institutions submit their self-study at least 90 days before the accreditation visit. The evaluation team receives the self-study. For a pro tip, if you are on an evaluation committee, start writing the evaluation committee's report before or while on the accreditation visit. The bulk of the report will be an evaluative summary of the self-study. The library section (addressing the standard and presenting the data) may be twenty pages; the evaluator will shrink it down to a page or two. You want to read the committee's comments on the library. Do not let administrators hide the committee report. Additionally, the committee report can be added to the institution's archives.

One of the critical parts of an Evaluation Team report is a one or two-page set of "committee recommendations." They are referenced as *recommendations* as it is up to the ATS Board of Commissioners to decide on the final actions.

- First, there is a recommendation to approve degrees and the length of accreditation. Ten years is the entire accreditation period, although it is becoming less common. However, for many years, it has been typical.
- Second, there is a recommendation to affirm several distinctive strengths. It is not uncommon to see libraries mentioned here.
- Third, there is a recommendation for issues that need special attention during the next period of accreditation. These are things to work on and that

- you will be asked about next time.
- Fourth, there are recommendations around required reports and, in some cases, focused visits or warnings. It is typical to have a couple of reports due back to ATS on items that are more troublesome or urgent than the next period of accreditation. This is a place of accountability: if you need a report back from ATS for the library, that gets the attention of your administration and board.
  - Less common, but not uncommon, is the recommendation for a focused visit—which often means an ATS staff member and perhaps one other peer evaluator will revisit your campus. Focused visits are not necessarily more urgent or serious, but they are for complex circumstances that make it difficult for a single written report to address.
  - Warnings and formal notations are more serious and registered publicly.

Most self-studies have used conclusions/recommendations in each area, including the library, to self-evaluate where improvements might be made. Use that wisely. The Evaluation Team may make good use of them in their report. In response to the library standard and sub-standards, the Evaluation Team will often make a “summary statement” that is based upon the self-study and interviews. Their responses may also include suggestions or things “to consider”—which can be summarized feedback from peers. However, these are ultimately suggestions. In the writing of the reports, the word *recommend* is reserved for items that are officially noted as action items needing attention. Anytime the word *recommends* appears, this triggers a required response.

## REFERENCES

- Association of Theological Schools. 2020. “Standards of Accreditation.” <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation.pdf>.
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Association of Theological Schools. n.d. "About ATS." Accessed September 21, 2024. <https://www.ats.edu/About-ATS>.

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**ENDNOTES**

- 1 The connection between ATS and Atla has existed for many years. As many know, Atla was born out of discussions within ATS, and there has traditionally been a good stable of Atla members who have served on evaluation committees. Historically, several Atla members have gone on to serve on the ATS staff, including Charles Willard, Bill Miller, Tom Tanner, Debbie Creamer, and Michael Hemenway.

