

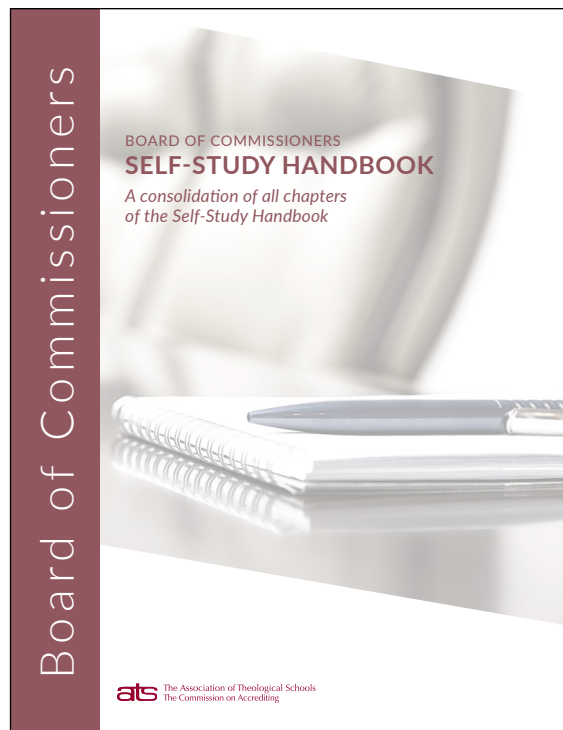
# New *Self-Study Handbook* coming soon

By DEBBIE CREAMER

As the redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures moves forward, the ATS Board of Commissioners has been busy planning for how it might best support schools as they transition from the current standards to new ones, if these are adopted by the membership in June 2020. One aspect of this is a major revision of the Commission's Self-Study Handbook.

Previously called the *Handbook of Accreditation*, the *Self-Study Handbook* includes an introduction to accreditation by the Commission on Accrediting, guidelines for conducting an institutional self-study, guidelines for institutions receiving accreditation evaluation committees, guidelines for members of accreditation evaluation committees, and guidelines for using the Commission Standards of Accreditation in institutional evaluation. The *Handbook* is also the current location of the Commission's "Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment of Student Learning." The *Handbook* is an essential tool, along with events such as the Self-Study Workshop and individualized coaching by ATS Commission staff, for schools engaging in the self-study process.

Throughout the "year of listening," the Redevelopment Task Force has repeatedly heard the membership's desire for clarity, including the request for standards and procedures that are brief and easily understood without sacrificing quality. While the text of the *Self-Study Handbook* has been revised over time, it—like the current standards—is also clearly the result of "accrued wisdom" that has built up over time (and, thus, is sometimes repetitive or not organized in ways that would best serve our schools). For example, the current *Handbook* is more than 150 pages, which seems unhelpful when a good self-study report is typically closer to 100 pages. Schools have noted that it can be difficult to find the information they need, that the document doesn't attend well to the



structure of some of our schools or to the ways schools utilize technology, and that it can be hard to tell which of the "guidelines" from the Board are requirements and which are suggestions.

Beyond the content and format of the document itself, the Board has observed that some schools feel burdened by the weightiness of the self-study process, and that others have a hard time aligning it with their institutional contexts or current planning and evaluation processes. As the Commission engages in the redevelopment of the standards, it seemed to the Board of Commissioners to be an appropriate time to take on a full revision of the *Self-Study Handbook*—not just to align it with the (possible) new standards, but also to think more holistically about what would best serve the work of institutional evaluation and peer review for our schools at this time.

While such a revision clearly cannot be completed until the new standards take form and are adopted by the membership, the work of revising the *Handbook* has already begun, with particular attention to those sections that focus on the processes of self-study and peer

evaluation. In line with the redevelopment's focus on elegant simplicity, the Commission believes that both the *Handbook* and the self-study process can be streamlined (without any loss of quality) and—in line with the redevelopment's emphasis on contextuality—it believes the *Handbook* and the self-study process can be refined in ways that better serve the wide range of ATS schools.

For example, we are developing “self-study prompts” that could accompany each standard to help schools understand the sorts of narratives or evidence that might be offered in response to a particular standard. While some of these prompts might be addressed to “schools in general,” others can help schools of a particular type (embedded/freestanding, Canadian/US, small/large, etc.) see themselves in the standard and respond in contextually-relevant ways. We are also exploring ways in which technology might enhance the self-study report and evaluation visit processes (e.g., by making a “virtual documents room” more normal). And, if the approved standards are shorter than the current ones ([see accompanying article](#)), we imagine that schools would be able to create a shorter, but still comprehensive, self-study report.

If new standards are approved at the June 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting, the Board will be prepared to have a new *Self-Study Handbook* in place no later than the Fall 2020 Self-Study Workshop (for schools planning to host a comprehensive evaluation visit in fall 2022) and hopes to have the *Handbook* available to the membership (on the [ATS website](#)) by mid-summer 2020.

The Board is also working to develop clear grandfathering guidelines, noting that it does not desire to disrupt any schools that are already in the midst of the self-study process when new standards and procedures are adopted. It wants to facilitate the transition to new (and

improved!) standards and procedures as quickly as feasible—perhaps like a school with a major curricular revision, trying both to reassure graduating students that the expectations are not changing for them while also affirming the ways in which the revision is a desirable improvement. Schools in the midst of the self-study process, or that will be beginning the process prior to June 2020, are encouraged to contact their Commission staff liaisons (as indicated on their [membership directory pages](#)).

A new *Self-Study Handbook* is only one of a number of strategies we are working on to support schools (and evaluation committees) throughout this transition. The Commission will continue to offer the Self-Study Workshop and the School for Peer Reviewers in Pittsburgh each year. We will be updating all of our website resources (including those for [assessment and evaluation](#)) once the new Standards and Procedures are adopted. In addition, recognizing that we will need to reorient all of our peer evaluators in light of the new standards, we are developing a new approach to education that can better support our evaluation committee members before and during a visit (watch for more on this in a future *Colloquy Online* article) as well as creating new interactive resources for member schools.

We, at the ATS office, have jokingly called this “the year everything changes!” However, one thing that is not changing is the Commission staff's commitment to its member schools, including the high-touch approach that characterizes the ATS style of accreditation. We recognize that each school is likely to have its own questions, challenges, and hopes as we move through these next stages of the redevelopment process. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your staff liaisons if we can be of any assistance.



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