

PROCEDURES

for

Conducting Joint SACS/ATS Reaffirmation Committee Visits

Purpose

The purpose of these procedures is to provide implementation details for the agreement between the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) to conduct joint reaffirmation of accreditation committee visits for dual member institutions that request such visits. These procedures provide guidance to the respective agency staff members, to institutions, and to peer review committees.

Compliance Certification

Institutions approved for joint visits will complete and submit to both agencies the modified Compliance Certification enclosed at Appendix 1. This certification addresses the accreditation standards of both agencies. In addition to directions on the modified Compliance Certification specific to the joint review, additional guidance for completing the Compliance Certification may be found in the SACS *Handbook for Reaffirmation of Accreditation* and in the SACS *Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*.

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

Institutions approved for joint visits will prepare and submit to both agencies a Quality Enhancement Plan according to SACS requirements. ATS will accept the Compliance Certification and the Quality Enhancement Plan in lieu of its traditional self-study. ATS may consult with the institution and render suggestions about the QEP and its applicability to ATS standards.

Peer Review Committees Composition and Conduct

SACS and ATS staff members will coordinate joint committee invitations and appointments according to the time line below so that theological education is appropriately represented on both the Off-Site and On-Site Committees. The chairs of both committees will be trained by both agencies and will understand theological education and the standards and practices of both agencies. Staff of both agencies will consult regarding an appropriate chair, and SACS staff will clear the chair selection with the institution and extend the invitation to the chair. SACS and ATS staff will consult at least once a year regarding potential evaluators, their training and use. SACS staff will take the lead in making review/writing assignments for committee members but will consult with ATS staff before the assignments are finalized. The committee configurations below may be altered to suit specific institutional situations.

Off-Site Committee (committee composition depends on cluster composition) –

Chair

Sitting President from a theological institution or with experience

Institutional Effectiveness Specialist

Librarian

Student Services Specialist from a theological institution

Finance Officer

At least one education program/faculty evaluator from theological education – more than one person from theological education is desirable

On-Site Committee (committee composition depends on results of Off-Site review) –

Chair

Sitting President as QEP Evaluator, typically from theological education

Institutional Effectiveness Specialist

Librarian or Student Services Specialist

Usually two theological education program/faculty evaluators

Finance Officer only if needed

QEP Lead Evaluator nominated by institution and approved by staffs of both agencies

Others as necessary, tailored to the institutional context

Off-Site Committee reviews are conducted in accordance with SACS procedures. ATS staff may be present during the review of ATS-accredited institutions at the option of ATS. SACS will send the Off-Site Committee report to ATS. ATS staff will have access to the SACS SharePoint site as the committee report is being developed.

Either agency staff, or both, may elect to conduct a staff advisory visit to the institution before the On-Site visit. If possible, these visits will be coordinated to coincide. The chair of a visiting committee may elect to conduct a preliminary visit to the institution after consultation with both staffs. The chair of the visiting committee will

conduct a conference call with committee members approximately two weeks before the visit. If at all possible, both SACS and ATS staff will participate in the call.

On-Site Committees are generally conducted according to SACS norms and time lines, but length of visit and even committee composition may be adjusted to insure that the needs and usual practices of both agencies are honored. Normally On-Site visits will be Tuesday-Thursday but may begin on Monday evening. Normally On-Site joint visits will not be scheduled during the first week of the month. Decisions regarding these matters will be made by the staff members from both agencies in consultation with the visiting committee chair and the institution being visited. Except for those standards with which compliance must specifically be verified on site, every attempt will be made to resolve compliance issues before the On-Site visit. In doing so, the visiting committee will review the institution's Focused Report (if submitted) in advance and deliberate in at least one conference call before the visit so that most of the time at the institution can be spent in discussing and evaluating the QEP.

SACS policies allow for observers to accompany visiting committees under specified circumstances. In such cases, the SACS staff member will obtain, before extending the invitation to an observer, the permission of the Chief Executive Officer of the institution being visited and of the appropriate ATS staff member for the observer to accompany the visiting committee. The SACS policy on observers will then pertain.

If it elects to submit a Focused Report, the institution will provide both agencies and the On-Site Committee members copies of its Focused Report submitted in response to the Off-Site Committee Report. The Focused Report is due at least six weeks before the On-Site Committee visit. The institution will also send both agencies and the On-Site Committee members copies of its QEP at least six weeks before the visit.

Time Line

Because they offer post-baccalaureate degrees, theological institutions will be on the SACS Track B schedule. The institution's reaffirmation date (year) is referenced as Year Three in the following schedule, and plans to submit reports and take other actions by the deadlines specified should be developed accordingly.

Year One

- Institutions are notified by SACS in March regarding their upcoming Reaffirmation process and are invited to the SACS institutional orientation at that time and to the ATS Self-Study Workshop.
- Orientation of Leadership Teams – second Monday in June – an institution desiring a joint visit must make its request in writing to both agencies before this orientation session -- ATS staff to attend if possible to discuss issues unique to joint visits -- date of On-Site

Committee visit is set at this orientation, so SACS and ATS staff and the institution should consult in advance regarding site visit dates and general planning for the visit including time lines and consultation points

Year Two

- Off-Site and On-Site Committee chairs selected – mid-January – staff will need to consult well before this time
- Off-Site Committee selected and finalized by May 1 – staff will need to begin consultation regarding membership much earlier
- Compliance Certification due – September 10
- On-Site Committee selected by October 1 but subject to adjustment pending Off-Site review results -- staff will need to consult and coordinate committee structure and proposed membership well before October 1
- Off-Site Committee review conducted – second week in November

Year Three

- Quality Enhancement Plan and Focused Report (if submitted) due – six weeks before the On-Site review
- On-Site Committee visit – sometime during the period mid-January to mid-April
- Response to On-Site Committee report – five months after the committee visit
- Review and action by SACS – first week in December
- Review and action by ATS – January or June

Exit Conference

An exit conference will be conducted with the institution upon completion of the visit before the On-Site Committee departs. The findings of the committee concerning compliance, including Recommendations and Notations, and QEP consultation will be reported. Then institutional representatives, typically the leadership team and others involved with the QEP, will be given an opportunity to engage and converse with the visiting committee about the committee's findings, particularly regarding the QEP. The conference usually takes less than an hour.

Reaffirmation Committee Report and Institutional Response

The chair of the On-Site Committee (Reaffirmation Committee) is responsible for assembling and editing the final report using the template in Appendix 2. Copies of the report will be sent to both agencies. The institution will send its response to the report to both agencies according to their policies and deadlines.

Additional Disclosure

The institution will send all subsequent reports requested by either agency, including follow-up or monitoring reports and fifth-year reports, to both agencies. All subsequent action letters will be sent by each agency to the institution and to the other agency.

Committee Expenses

Visiting committee members will submit travel expense claims to SACS and will be reimbursed by SACS which will then send a bill for total expenses to the institution. SACS reimbursement policies will be followed, and the SACS expense form will be used. ATS staff will be reimbursed by ATS according to ATS policies.

Attachments –

Appendix 1, Compliance Certification template

Appendix 2, Reaffirmation Committee Report template