



**THE ASSOCIATION OF REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES (ARTS)  
COMMISSION ON ACCREDITATION (COA) SELF-STUDY GUIDE FOR  
ACCREDITED MEMBER REAFFIRMATION AND APPLICANTS FOR ACCREDITED  
MEMBERSHIP**



## **1. Introduction**

Accreditation, by the Association of Reformed Theological Seminaries (ARTS) does not end after an institution achieves accreditation, but is an on-going process of reaffirmation structured to instill discipline in institutions to seek continuous improvement by analyzing their functions, appraising their performances in accomplishing objectives, reviewing their planning procedures, and discovering the means by which there can be institutional improvement.

Accreditation then can be considered as forming a judgment that an institution is providing the quality of education that the Church, ARTS, society, and the institution's peers have the right to expect. This judgment is accomplished by comparing the performance of the institution against its mission and ARTS Standards of Accreditation.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Self-Study**

The Self-Study is the vehicle by which an institution conducts a detailed evaluation of its structure, administration, and programs that describe its current state and thereby assist in the goal of seeking to improve the quality of its activities in all aspects. The Self-Study involves the open and honest identification of the institution's strengths and weaknesses and the identification and elaboration of the steps necessary to correct those weaknesses. The Self-Study requires a total commitment on the part of the institution to strive for improvement rather than retain the current operational conditions.

Through the process of conducting a Self-Study, an institution systematically completes a thorough examination of every part of its operations and stated mission, as well as its compliance with the Standards established by the ARTS COA. The Self-Study affords the institution the opportunity to determine the success it is having in accomplishing its goals and objectives via a detailed examination of all aspects of the institution.

The Self-Study should also be an on-going process. It is only through continuous reflection on the Self-Study that continuous improvement of the quality of education can be achieved.

### **1.2 How to Conduct the Self-Study**

There are numerous ways for an institution to conduct its Self-Study, thus it is not possible to identify a single method. Depending on the availability of resources and size of the institution, a Self-Study can take anywhere from four to nine months to complete. One thing is for certain, once an institution completes its study, it will be necessary to review the working document. At the end, the document developed during the Self-Study should be an honest, accurate, and complete statement of the status of the institution at the time the review was conducted.



In order to complete the numerous tasks involved in the complex effort of conducting a Self-Study, it is recommended that institutions establish a committee to oversee the activity. Regardless of how the study is managed, to be successful, the institution must follow a systematic or methodical examination of its activities. For this reason, ARTS COA recommends that a project plan be developed before the institution embarks on detailed assessments.

The project plan needs to specify the parts of the institution that will be assessed, specify how data is to be collected and measured, explain the post data collection review process, determine how decisions will be made, identify personnel responsibilities, and provide an overall timeline for the entire process.

A well-constructed project plan and Self-Study must collect raw data that can be tabulated. The Self-Study must query individuals representing the institution, both internally and externally (administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, employers, etc.)

Finally, the Self-Study is more than an activity in gathering data. A properly constructed Self-Study requires the institution to examine, evaluate, and assess all parts of the institution. The study will cast a light on inefficiencies, deficiencies, and shortfalls. The institution should undertake the Self-Study with the attitude that it is a critical component in continuous institutional improvement that should be repeated often, and not a one-time step to achieve accreditation.

### **1.3 Accreditation and the Self-Study**

ARTS' accreditation process serves to assure the public and members that the programs and services of each of its accredited institutions are or the highest possible level of academic, religious, and professional quality. One of the most effective mechanisms by which this objective can be met is by the establishment of the Association's high academic standards; the associated institutional Self-Study; followed by a thorough external peer review evaluation team; and final review by the ARTS Commission on Accreditation.



## **2. Outline of the Steps Involved in the Accreditation Process**

1. An institution completes and submits, to ARTS COA, its application for eligibility and the required fees to be admitted as an applicant (the application form and details of the steps and fees are found on the ARTS website.)
2. Once the application is approved the institution is declared an applicant and begins preparing its Self-Study.
  - a. The institution organizes its Self-Study team.
  - b. The Self-Study team creates its project plan.
  - c. The Self-Study team begins its assessment.
  - d. The Self-Study team writes its draft report.
  - e. The Self-Study report is revised, finalized, and approved by the institution and its board.
3. After completion of its Self-Study, the institution submits the associated report and required fees to ARTS COA to be admitted as a candidate.
4. Once the institution's Self-Study has been approved they are admitted as a candidate for accreditation.
5. The ARTS COA assembles and schedules the Site-Visit team.
6. The Site-Visit team conducts its review, develops its report, and submits its findings along with the institution's Self-Study to the ARTS COA.
7. The ARTS COA decides on granted accredited status, or reaffirmation for those institutions previously accredited.

The details of this process are to be found in the Association's Policies and Procedures found on the ARTS website.



### **3. Suggestions for a what to include in a Self-Study Project Plan**

ARTS COA recommends that the institution create a Self-Study Project Plan. This plan should contain the following:

1. The identification of the institution's Self-Study team, their roles, and responsibilities.
2. The development of a Self-Study timeline.
3. The identification of all data sources (institutional, programmatic, financial, legal, academic records, etc.) to be collected and analyzed.
4. The identification of all people (internal, external, public, students, alumni, employers, board members, faculty, staff, administrators, and officers) to be interviewed.
5. Budget of expected costs in completing the Self-Study.



#### **4. Organizing the Self-Study Team**

ARTS COA recommends that the institution consider including representatives from the faculty, administration, board of directors, student body, and alumni on its Self-Study team. For small institutions this may be difficult, but a diversity of representatives that will provide open and honest assessments of the institution is critical for the success of the Self-Study. The Self-Study is not to be viewed as an effort in collecting data that merely describes the current state of the institution, but is to be used as an opportunity for the institution to assess how well it is accomplishing its mission and adheres to the academic standards set by the Association.



## 5. Self-Study Data to Collect

An established institution will already will have accumulated several years of information and have historical files that deal with documented results of student learning outcomes, degree program outcomes, the location and profession of alumni, faculty development and performance, financial stability, current and planned facilities, student services and support, and learning/research resources. The Self-Study team will analyze this data and provide a plan to address any areas of non-compliance with ARTS Academic Standards. Institutions that are relatively new and have not developed a system for planning and assessment will find it necessary to compile as much historical data and plans that have been developed on each area of the institution. After the data has been compiled, it must be analyzed using ARTS Academic Standards as the guideline.

The specific data to be collected is that which enables the institution to assess how it complies to all parts of the ARTS Standards. The areas the institution will collect data and analyze are as follows:

### 1. Conditions of Eligibility

### 2. Academic Quality

Standard 1: Mission & Objectives

Standard 2: Academic Programs

Standard 3: Institutional and Learning Resources

Standard 4: Administration

Standard 5: Faculty

Standard 6: Assessing Student Learning

### 3. Accountability

Standard 7: Governance & Authority

Standard 8: Institutional Integrity & Communication

### 4. Student and Enrollment Services

Standard 9: Student Services

Standard 10: Enrollment Services

### 5. Improvements

Standard 11: Making Appropriate Improvements



## 6. Self-Study Report Template

### 1. Cover Letter.

The institution shall include a cover letter from the Chief Executive Officer indicating that the institution and governing board has approved the contents, data, and conclusions in the Self-Study. The cover letter should also indicate that this Self-Study is submitted to ARTS for the purpose of assessing its candidacy for membership or its reaffirmation.

### 2. Introduction

#### 2.1 Purpose of the Self-Study

Provide a general introduction to the institution. This should include a brief description of its mission and purpose, which will be expanded upon further in the study. The institution should also indicate the ARTS status being sought (Candidate Status or Reaffirmation). The institution should also identify the types of degree programs it offers, describe its academic calendar, enrollment, and church or denominational affiliation (if any).

#### 2.2 History of the Institution

Provide a narrative history of the founding, growth, and development of the institution. The narrative should identify any events that provide a good perspective of the background of the institution, critical in explaining its character and ethos.

#### 2.3 Relationship with ARTS

Provide a description of the institution's relationship with ARTS, such as when it submitted its application (if it applies), when the application was approved (if it applies), when it received accredited status (if it applies), and when was last reaffirmed (if it applies). Include the how the initial contact or relationship with ARTS was contracted, and include names and dates of such correspondence.

#### 2.4 Responses to Previous ARTS Site-Visit Reports and/or Other Accrediting Agency Actions.

The institution should, if applicable, provide a detailed narrative on the response and date of compliance of any previous ARTS Site-Visit recommendations and/or steps it has taken in response to any actions taken previously by another accrediting body.



## 2.5 Institutional Self-Study Project Plan

Provide the institutional Self-Study project plan used for the development of this Self-Study. Include a narrative that describes the difference between the plan and how the Self-Study was actually conducted, which should include the final time-line, and budget.

The Self-Study report should address each Standard (including each sub-standard) in found in the ARTS Standards of Accreditation. The report should 1) reference the assessment data and analyses used to arrive at its conclusions, 2) include all documentation used in the self-study process to verify that the institution is in compliance with each ARTS Standard, and 3) provide the plans for coming into compliance of any part of the Standard in which non-compliance is found.

## 3. Conditions of Eligibility Compliance Standard

Provide a narrative in accordance with the required data and analysis of these items as described in the ARTS Standards of Accreditation.

- 3.1 Authorization
- 3.2 Statement of Faith
- 3.3 Mission
- 3.4 Operational Experience
- 3.5 Chief executive officer
- 3.6 Academic Programs
- 3.7 Financial Viability

## 4. Advancing Academic Quality Standards

Provide a narrative in accordance with the required data and analysis of these items as described in the ARTS Standards of Accreditation.

- 4.1 Standard 1: Mission and Objectives
- 4.2 Standard 2: Academic Programs
- 4.3 Standard 3: Institutional and Learning Resources
- 4.4 Standard 4: Administration
- 4.5 Standard 5: Faculty
- 4.6 Standard 6: Assessing Student Learning

## 5. Accountability Standards

- 5.1 Standard 7: Governance and Authority
- 5.2 Standard 8: Institutional Integrity and Communication



6. Student and Enrollment Services Standards

6.1 Standard 9: Student Services

6.2 Standard 10: Enrollment Services

7. Improvements Standards

7.1 Standard 11: Making Appropriate Improvements



## **7. Additional Materials to Submit to the ARTS COA**

In addition to the Self-Study Report narrative with all of its necessary attachments and documentation, the institution must include copies of the following when seeking reaffirmation or accreditation candidacy. Indicate by N/A for any item that does not apply to the institution.

- 7.1 Academic Catalog
- 7.2 Student Handbook
- 7.3 Faculty Handbook
- 7.4 Financial Aid Manual
- 7.5 Institutional Personnel Manual
- 7.6 Board of Directors Manual
- 7.7 Institutional Job Descriptions
- 7.8 Institutional Strategic Plan
- 7.9 Institutional Self-Study Report Results Improvement Plan
- 7.10 Institutional Policies and Procedures Manual
- 7.11 Last Two Year's Financial Audits

## **8. Approval Letter of the Self-Study Report by the Institution's President and Board**

The President and Board of Directors must review and approve the Self-Study Report prior to submission to the ARTS Commission on Accreditation. Any questions, changes, or issues raised must be addressed and when necessary incorporated in rewrites. The President and Board must submit a letter stating their approval of the final report as part of the Self-Study submission to ARTS.

## **9. ARTS Executive Director Review of the Institution's Self-Study**

Prior to submission of the final Self-Study Report, an electronic copy of the final draft should be sent to the ARTS Executive Director for COA. Upon receipt of the documents, the ARTS Executive Director will review the materials for completeness and make any suggestions necessary for the finalization of the document. Once the Executive Director indicates the report is final then an electronic and hardcopy of the report should be sent to the ARTS COA offices no later than 14 business days after Executive Director approval to proceed.



## **10. ARTS Site-Visit**

Information concerning the details and necessary preparations for the Site-Visit Team will be sent to the President prior to the visit. The details of the site visit are in the Association's Policies and Procedures and the Site-Visit Team Manual.

## **11. Candidate Status, Accredited Status, or Reaffirmation**

The Commission meets face-to-face once a year, in October, to review materials relevant to their accreditation duties. However, the Commission frequently holds conference meetings to allow for differences in schedules and accreditation activities.