



**ARTS Guidelines for
Accreditation Site-Visit Teams**

1. Purpose of This Document

The Association of Reformed Theological Seminaries (ARTS) Standards of Accreditation states that its mission is to “preserve and advance the academic quality, accountability, and improvement of seminaries committed to educating students in the tenets of Reformed Theology.” ARTS Commission on Accreditation (COA) has the responsibility for accomplishing this mission primarily through the accreditation process, which involves site-visit evaluations, reports, and assessments of institutional preparedness and adherence to the Association’s Standards.

These guidelines were developed to support that mission and include (1) the qualifications, appointment, and expectations of site-visit members; (2) the work of the site-visit team; and (3) a typical schedule of the accreditation process. Site-visit team members are expected to be familiar with these guidelines and to conduct their work according to these expectations.

2. ARTS COA Site-Visit Evaluations

There are several types of site-visit evaluations the ARTS COA conducts.

There is the initial evaluation, which occurs when an applicant institution has completed its Self-study and is moved to candidate status. Following approval by the COA of the institution’s Self-study, the site-visit team conducts an institutional evaluation in order to (1) verify claims made in the institution’s self-study materials; (2) formulate recommendations relative to the institution’s compliance with the Commission’s Standards; and (3) make an overall recommendation regarding the issuance of a Letter of Commendation regarding the institution’s accredited status.

There is the reaffirmation evaluation, which occurs when an institution’s initial five year or subsequent ten year period of accreditation is up for renewal. The site-visit team performs the same three tasks as above, with the understanding that the institution is being evaluated for its continuing membership in ARTS.

These evaluations depend on the dedication of individuals who are willing and capable of serving in a volunteer capacity to further the mission and purpose of the Association.

3. Site-Visit Team Members

Composition, Selection, Qualifications, and Appointment

The site-visit team shall be composed of three people. All three members of the team shall be selected by the Executive Director. Site-visit members are generally chosen from the pool of five COA commissioners, unless there are any institutional conflicts of interest. In the case of conflicts of interest, administrators/academic member(s) from other ARTS institution(s) will be selected by the Executive Director. No site-visit member can be a member of the ARTS Board of Directors. Additionally, one member of the team must always be selected from the public, as defined in the Association’s Bylaws (Article VI, Section 1). If the public COA commissioner is not available to serve on the site-visit team the Executive Director will select, in consultation, another person from the public who satisfies the Association’s Bylaws on the definition of a public member.

Those who serve on site-visit teams should meet the following qualifications: (1) knowledge of the mission of higher theological education, (2) ability to evaluate an institution on the basis of the Association's Standards of Accreditation, (3) adherence to the Association's Tenets of Faith, and (4) ability to work as a member of the site-visit team.

Expectations

The credibility and effectiveness of the accreditation process depends on the professionalism of the contribution by site-visit team members. The COA expects team members to conduct evaluations and prepare reports that are fair, thorough, accurate, and informative.

Confidentiality

Site-visit team members will necessarily have access to all aspects of an institution's operations. As a result, team members will be aware of the strengths, weaknesses, faults, and internal issues of an institution. This knowledge must be dealt with extreme care and confidentially, and site-visit team members may not discuss this information in any fashion apart from the site-visit team and COA accreditation deliberations. Evaluators must refrain from discussing anything related to the findings of the team or its recommendations to the COA with anyone other than team members or COA commissioners and staff.

The Tone and Character of Site-Visits

The goal of ARTS COA is the improvement of Reformed theological education. Furthermore, every aspect of the ARTS COA accreditation process, including site-visits must be conducted in a godly manner. Evaluators must conduct themselves in a thoughtful, fair, and objective manner that strives for quality theological education. ARTS COA process seeks to hold schools accountable for the achievement of excellence in Reformed theological education.

4. What the Site-Visit Team Does

Before the Site-Visit

Before the site-visit, team members are expected to read.

- This document,
- The ARTS COA Standards of Accreditation,
- ARTS Constitution, Bylaws, and Policies and Procedures,
- The institution's Self-Study Report and supporting documents, material, and information (provided by the institution).

Prior to the site-visit, the Executive Director will discuss responsibilities of the task with each team member. The Executive Director will organize at least one conference call, about 30 days before the visit, to allow the team to select a team leader, review travel arrangements, and ensure the team is prepared for the task of conducting an institution site-visit evaluation.

Materials Provided by the Executive Director

When applicable, the Executive Director will send to each team member;

- The report of the institution's previous comprehensive evaluation, findings, and results.
- The institution's previous Self-Study.

During the Site-Visit

The site-visit team should use the institution's Self-Study Report as its guide and agenda for conducting a site-visit. As such, the team will systematically proceed with an analysis and the process of data collection of these items. In each of these areas, the team is to determine if the institution has achieved the goals these standards seek to obtain.

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

Accountability

Standard 7: Governance & Authority

Standard 8: Institutional Integrity & Communication

Student and Enrollment Services

Standard 9: Student Services

Standard 10: Enrollment Services

Improvements

Standard 11: Making Appropriate Improvements

Data Gathering

In site-visit evaluations, team members gather data by interviewing individuals and groups, and by examining institutional documents and records.

Interviews provide a means of gathering information, perceptions, concerns, and opinions about the institution and its educational programs. Through interviews, team members learn how individuals in the school view the content and recommendations of the Self-Study Report, the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, and other issues regarding the institution's adherence to the Association's Standards. Team members should prepare questions before interviews and focus on listening. Team members are not to offer opinions, counsel, or make comparisons to other institutions. Interviews should be guided toward substantive assessment of important issues.

Team members also gather data by examining the institution's records and documents. These data help in forming a basis for evaluating claims in the self-study or perceptions obtained during interviews. The types of data typically reviewed include strategic plans; financial audits; course syllabi; admission records; minutes of faculty and board meetings; handbooks; staff and student records; and curricula vitae of faculty.

Forming an Evaluation and Recommendation

The primary purpose of the site-visit team's activities is to develop a comprehensive evaluation of the institution. This evaluation should be based on an analysis of the institution's Self-Study Report and data gathered by the team during its site-visit. Throughout the evaluation process, team members must share information, collaborate, and consult with one another.

The COA needs a formal recommendation regarding the institution's accredited status. The Commission expects each site-visit team to make recommendations in three distinct areas: (1) a recommendation regarding accreditation of the institution and its degree programs that fall within the scope of ARTS; (2) a statement of the strengths to be noted; and (3) areas where the institution requires further attention to be documented in the final report and possible Letters of Notations or probation.

Writing the Report

The written report of the team (1) documents its findings, (2) formally forwards its recommendations to the COA, and (3) provides a record of its evaluation of the school.

For purposes of consistency, the COA requires that each site-visit report include the following sections: (1) an introduction/history about the school and the evaluation itself, (2) a section on each of the COA Standards, and (3) the team's formal recommendations.

Reports can be both descriptive and prescriptive. In other words, the report can identify those facts about an institution that led to a team's judgments and indicate what the institution should do. The report's purpose is to present facts, as perceived by the team that serves as the basis for the evaluation and recommendations of the team.

Team members are expected to write in a style that is clear and concise, to focus on the data and observations that led to conclusions and recommendations. Direct references to persons by name should be avoided. The report should describe problems that may be a result of personnel issues in terms of the *problem*, not in terms of the *individual* responsible. The report should draw attention to issues, problems, and strengths without implying doubts about the institution's wisdom or the competence of its staff or faculty. The report should be written in the third person with no first person singular expressions, emphasizing the consensus of the team. Reports should be as brief as possible and will generally not exceed fifty double-spaced pages.

After the Evaluation

The team leader will edit the report and be responsible for its submission to the Executive Director for COA. The team leader will send the draft of the report to the site-visit team, school, and Executive Director for review and correction of any factual errors only. After this, the team leader will prepare a final report and send copies to team members the Executive Director. The Executive Director will then send the final copy to the COA Commissioners and the institution and invite the institution to respond within 30 days.

5. Schedule for an Accreditation Evaluation

Each team will determine the schedule it will use in fulfilling its duties; however, most evaluations will follow a schedule of activities like the following:

Arrival Day

An Initial Meeting of the Team

First Full Day

Interview with the Chief Executive Officer

Interviews with Other Administrative Officers

Interviews with Members of the Faculty

Interviews with Other Administrative Personnel

Interviews with a Representative or Groups of Students

Team Meeting

Second Full Day

Examination of Records, Minutes, and Institutional Documents

Interviews with Graduates (these may be done via teleconference or at a different time if none are nearby)

Interviews with Members of the Governing Board (these may be done via teleconference or at a different time if none are nearby)

Interviews with Other Staff Members

Team Meeting

Brief Meeting with the School's Chief Executive Officer

Departure Day

Team Meeting

Exit Meeting with Institution (not a time for discussing conclusions)

6. Administrative Procedures and Policies

Required Commitment

The amount of work an evaluation requires from team members can be significant. Team members should plan for four full days away from their offices and homes to conduct site-visits

Expense Reimbursement

All site-visit expenses are to be paid by the institution being evaluated. The ARTS COA will provide its team members expense forms, which should be submitted to the

Commission office for transmittal to the institution for reimbursement following the evaluation. Team members are reimbursed for travel expenses, hotel, and meal expenses that are not direct-billed to the host institution. Team members who choose to drive their own vehicles will be reimbursed for mileage (and any parking fees or tolls) at the current government approved rate. The institution being evaluated is responsible for all travel costs of the team and the ARTS COA Executive Director, who normally accompanies the team, and serves as a reference for both the team and institution.

Evaluator Evaluation

Team leaders of accreditation site-visit teams are required to complete a brief evaluation of each team member. In addition, the chief executive officer of the institution is asked to complete an evaluation of the school's overall experience with the accreditation process, including the work of the site-visit team, the Executive Director, and the COA. These evaluations are used to revise COA accrediting practices and procedures in order to improve the entire process.

7. Conclusion

Without the competence and significant contribution of time provided by evaluation team members, the accreditation process would be impossible. The service provided by site-visit team members is invaluable to the improvement of theological education of ARTS member schools.