



# Site Evaluation Visit Manual

**The American Academy for Liberal Education**

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# SITE EVALUATION VISIT MANUEL



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## Site Evaluation Visit Manual

This *Site Evaluation Visit Manual* is intended for *use both by site evaluation team members and by institutions or programs applying for accreditation by the Academy*. Its purpose is to facilitate preparation and conduct of effective site evaluation visits by making the key steps and purposes of the process transparent to all parties.

The time frames indicated in this manual are approximate, and represent typical cases. They may vary according to circumstances and necessity. When appropriate, reference is made in this text to the official policies and procedures of the Academy. Please contact the Academy or visit our website ([www.aale.org](http://www.aale.org)) for a copy of the current *Policies and Procedures Manual*.

### Selection of an Site Evaluation Team

As an applicant institution or program prepares to submit a final draft of its self-study, the American Academy for Liberal Education begins the process of selecting an appropriate site evaluation team. A typical site evaluation team consists of three members representing appropriate areas of experience and expertise. *These areas typically include senior administration, curriculum and teaching, and student learning assessment and services. Additional members may be added to a site evaluation team as required by circumstances.* The Academy makes reasonable efforts to ensure that site evaluation teams include distinguished teacher-scholars and/or administrators representing the liberal arts and sciences.

The Academy provides applicants in advance with the names, titles, and institutional affiliations of each proposed candidate for the evaluation team. The applicant institution or program shall have at least seven (7) working days for comment before potential team members are invited to serve. Applicants may also submit names, titles, and institutional affiliations of candidates for review and consideration by the Academy. However, final selection of site evaluators rests with the Academy. In cases where it becomes necessary to alter the original composition of an evaluation team for any reason, the applicant is given at least five (5) working days to comment on the proposed changes.

The Academy wishes to guard against actual or apparent conflicts of interest in the selection of evaluation team members. A conflict of interest is defined as a circumstance or situation in which an individual's duty to make an impartial or unbiased decision may be affected by prior, current, or anticipated affiliation, relationship, or association with the institution or program being

evaluated. Because Academy staff with the power of appointment or invitation to an evaluation team cannot know of every possible conflict of interest, potential evaluators are expected to refuse a team invitation if any conflict appears probable. Applicant institutions or programs are also expected to comment on any possible conflicts of interest among proposed candidates for evaluation teams. Evaluation team candidates or applicant institution officials concerned about potential conflicts of interest should consult the entry on “Conflicts of Interest in Accreditation” in the Academy’s *Policies and Procedures Manual*.

### **Responsibilities of Site Evaluators**

Evaluation team members are expected to act with dignity, courtesy, and professionalism at all times during their dealings with the Academy and the applicant institution or program they have agreed to visit. They should strive to conduct their work unobtrusively and to avoid disrupting the autonomy and normal functions of the applicant institution or program.

Team members are charged with responsibility for evaluating an applicant’s fulfillment of the Academy’s *Standards and Criteria* for accreditation or preaccreditation. As they do so, *they should always be mindful of broad issues of effective teaching, evidence of student learning, program and institutional goals and quality, administrative competence, and sound future planning, rather than on questions of mere compliance.*

In particular, evaluation team members are expected to:

- a. Review the applicant’s self-study for completeness;**
- b. Analyze the self-study’s findings, along with other supporting materials submitted by the applicant, from the perspective of an external critic and in light of the Academy’s *Standards and Criteria* as well as of the applicant’s own mission and educational objectives;**
- c. Assess the applicant’s apparent fulfillment of the Academy’s *Standards and Criteria*, as well as the applicant’s apparent fulfillment of its own mission and educational objectives, through first-hand interviews and observations.**

Responsibilities for particular areas of review and reporting will be assigned by the evaluation team chairman in consultation with Academy staff. The findings of the site evaluation team will be expressed in a site evaluation report (see below, “The Evaluation Team Report”).

Though it is expected that site evaluation team members will offer constructive observations and suggestions for operational and programmatic improvement during the course of a site visit, *any contributions made by team members in this informal consultative role are secondary to their primary responsibilities to the Academy.* Such observations should be explicitly distinguished from their review and reporting responsibilities as evaluation team members, and do not reflect the views or formal accreditation decisions of the Academy.

**Academy site evaluation teams are specifically asked not to offer judgments or opinions concerning the accreditability of an institution or program, or any aspect of an institution**

or program, at any time during the course of the site visit or in the final site evaluation report.

**Definitive evaluation of compliance with the Academy's *Standards and Criteria*, and the accreditation decision, will be made by the Academy's Board of Trustees, upon recommendation of the Academy's Council of Scholars, and following a thorough review of application materials including, but not limited to, the self-study, the site team report, and official responses by the applicant to the site team report.**

### **Honoraria**

The Academy provides an honorarium to each evaluation team member. The applicant institution is responsible for payment of the honoraria to the Academy.

### **Scheduling of Evaluation Site Visits**

Dates for site evaluation visits are usually set at least three to six months in advance. Site visits are typically three to four working days in length and take place during periods of normal academic operations for the applicant institution or program. In setting a date for the site evaluation visit *the applicant should be certain of the availability of its governing board chairman, chief executive officer, principal administrative and academic officers, faculty, students, as well as other key personnel involved in the preparation of the self-study.* Final selection for a site visit date will be made by the Academy in consultation with the applicant institution or program.

### **Postponement of Evaluation Site Visits**

If absolutely necessary, postponement of the site visit may be granted. Such a request should be directed to the Academy's president in writing, and should be made as far in advance as possible. The institution is expected to cover any additional costs incurred owing to a postponement.

The Academy also reserves the right to postpone a site visit if it becomes apparent that a) the institution has not sent necessary materials (i.e., eligibility documents, self-study) in a timely fashion to site visitors; or b) key personnel at the institution will not be available to meet with site visitors during the dates previously agreed upon. Notice of such postponement will be made in writing to the chief executive officer of the applicant institution or program. A postponement fee and any expenses incurred by the Academy will be covered by the applicant institution.

### **Site Visit Travel, Lodging, and Meals: Arrangements and Expenses**

It is the Academy's policy that the applicant institution or program covers reasonable expenses for travel, lodging, and meals incurred by evaluation team members and one Academy staff representative. The Academy makes every effort to keep the necessary costs of an accreditation site visit to a minimum, while making appropriate provisions for the comfort and convenience of site evaluation team members.

## **1. Travel**

**Site visitors are to use the Academy's approved travel agent. Arrangements will be made in consultation with evaluation team members at the lowest available advance purchase airfare, and reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate their travel needs and convenience. In exceptional cases evaluation team members may make their own travel arrangements, always with prior approval and at the lowest available advance purchase airfare or equivalent.**

Evaluation team members driving to a site visit destination in personal automobiles will be reimbursed at the per mile rate approved by the federal government; total reimbursement for mileage will not exceed the lowest available non-refundable, advance purchase airfare for equivalent travel. Arrangements for parking at or transportation to and from airports of origin should be made by evaluation team members, and will be reimbursed upon completion of the site visit.

Transportation to and from the site evaluation visit destination airport and during the course of the visit will be arranged by Academy staff. Rental of automobiles by site evaluation team members for travel to a site visit destination or for use during a site visit will be allowed only in exceptional circumstances and with prior approval from Academy staff.

## **2. Lodging**

In most cases lodging arrangements will be made directly by the applicant institution or program, in consultation with Academy staff. The applicant's accreditation liaison should contact evaluation team members individually to determine any special needs. Every reasonable effort should be made to lodge all site visitors and accompanying Academy staff at the same location, which should be within a reasonable distance of the applicant's campus.

## **3. Meals**

It is customary for the applicant institution to host an introductory dinner for the Academy's evaluation site team. Representatives of the applicant institution should include, whenever possible, the following: chair of the governing board and other trustee(s), chief executive officer, Academic Vice President, Dean, Accreditation Liaison, others as appropriate. This dinner provides evaluation team members and institutional representatives with an opportunity to become acquainted with one another and to begin their conversations in a collegial setting.

Working breakfasts as well as working meals taken on campus or with institutional staff, faculty, or students are hosted by or billed to the applicant institution. The remaining dinners are generally considered working meetings for the evaluators and are typically on the second and third evenings of the site visit.

## **Incidental Expenses**

Evaluation team members should send all appropriate receipts and expense forms to the Academy promptly following the site visit; only one expense form will be accepted from each evaluator. The Academy reimburses site visitors directly and then bills the institution or program for reasonable expenses incurred during or in transit to a site visit.

1. The following is a list of typical incidental expenses: a) economy parking; taxi, rail, or bus fares to and from airports and site visit destinations, as necessary; b) meals taken in transit to or from the site visit destination; c) telephone costs directly related to the visit; e) tips for site visit related expenses at 15%. In most cases travel, meal and lodging arrangements and expenses will be handled by the Academy for reimbursement by the applicant institution or program.
2. Incidental expenses generally not covered by the Academy or applicant institution include items such as laundry, movies, light snacks, mini-bar use, and other similar expenses incurred during or in transit to a site visit.

### **Materials for Review by Site Evaluation Team Members**

Approximately four weeks prior to the site visit, applicant institutions and programs should send directly to each evaluation [electronically on flash drives] team member the following materials for review:

1. cover letter;
2. Institutional Data Summary Form;
3. eligibility materials (including catalogs, faculty and student handbooks, audit reports, evidence of degree granting authority, etc.);
4. self-study;
5. any necessary supporting documents.

In addition, three [electronic on flash drives] copies of the above materials must be sent to the Academy.

**During the site visit, the institution or program should make available for use by evaluation team members other supporting documents, including but not limited to student portfolios and/or other appropriate evidence of student learning and achievement, survey data, board minutes, internal planning documents, development campaign materials, student recruitment materials, etc. These materials should be identified and selected prior to the visit in consultation with Academy staff and the site evaluation team chairman. Ideally, these materials should be set aside in a special secure workroom for site visitors, along with computers and a printer for use in drafting the site visit report.**

## **Outline of Procedures for Site Evaluation Team Members**

### **1. Before the Site Evaluation Visit**

1. Approximately three months before the date of the site visit, Academy staff will invite prospective evaluation team members to take part in the site visit. Prospective chairmen are contacted before other potential team members. Following selection of a site evaluation team chairman, Academy staff contact other prospective evaluation team members and invite them to take part in the site visit.
2. The chairman and other site evaluation team members receive official letters of appointment from the Academy, confirming dates for the site visit, the nature of the accreditation review (accreditation, preaccreditation, program, institutional), and including a roster of site visit participants, the Academy staff representative, and the applicant's accreditation liaison. Evaluation team members will also receive a copy of the applicant's academic catalog shortly after their appointment.
3. Approximately two months prior to the site visit, Academy staff will contact evaluation team members in order to begin making travel arrangements.
4. Approximately four weeks prior to the site visit, evaluation team members will receive directly from the applicant a complete set of materials for review, including a data summary form, eligibility materials, the self-study, and any necessary supporting documents. Evaluation team members should contact Academy staff and/or the applicant's accreditation liaison if they have any questions about the review materials, or if they would like to request additional materials not included in the original mailing.
5. Upon receipt of the materials for review, evaluation team members should determine whether, in their judgment:
  - a. the self-study appears to be sufficiently responsive and informative in light of the Academy's *Standards and Criteria*;
  - b. the self-study appears to be sufficiently evaluative and projective;
  - c. the self-study appears to be consistent with other published materials of the institution or program;
  - d. the self-study enables them to form a well-rounded preliminary view concerning the applicant's fulfillment the Academy's *Standards and Criteria* for accreditation;
  - e. any issues raised in the self-study report require further clarification or information.

An effective self-study submitted for accreditation should provide comprehensive, evaluative information concerning an institutions educational, administrative, financial, and other key functions. However, evaluation team members must remember that a weak self-study report does not necessarily indicate a weak program or institution, and vice-versa. Team members should keep in mind the distinct roles played by the self-study report and the evaluation team site visit in the accreditation process.

In the weeks leading up to the site visit, the chairman of an evaluation team is responsible for making preliminary assignments of areas of responsibility to the other team members, in

consultation with Academy staff. The chairman is also responsible for conducting preliminary conversations with other team members regarding the application materials for the institution or program under review. These responsibilities may be carried out by correspondence or by conference call, at the discretion of the team chairman and in consultation with Academy staff. As part of the training for site visitors, evaluators will be part of a conference call with the Academy's Director for Higher Education.

## **2. During the Site Visit: Sample Schedule**

Site visits conducted by the Academy typically take place over a period of four days, with the team arriving at the site visit destination on the afternoon of the first day, and departing on the afternoon of the fourth day. The sample schedule below will be typical of most accreditation site visits, but will vary as necessary and according to circumstances.

### **Sample Schedule for an Academy Site Visit**

#### **Day 1**

Afternoon      Team members arrive in Anytown, are met at airport by Academy staff member, check into lodgings, hold preliminary planning meeting (see below).

7:00              Team dinner with select College representatives, including chair of the governing board and other trustee(s), chief executive officer, Academic Vice President, Dean, Accreditation Liaison, others as appropriate.

#### **Day 2**

8:30-12:00      Team and individual meetings with senior administrative staff: President, Academic Vice-President, Dean, others from administrative list. Tour of campus and principal facilities. Class visits as possible.

12:00-1:00      Lunch with faculty members and/or any appropriate faculty committee(s).

1:30 - 5:30      Team and individual meetings/tours/conversations, and class visits: these may include librarian/library tour; science faculty/lab tour; admissions director; chief financial officer; athletic director, etc. Class visits as possible.

6:00              Dinner as team, access to computers on campus for writing in evening

#### **Day 3**

8:30 -12:00      Class visits.

- 12:00-1:30 Informal team lunch with students, representatives of student organizations, etc.
- 1:30-2:30 Open sessions: Any faculty, staff or students who want to meet visiting team members are invited to attend an informal reception hosted by the applicant institution.
- 2:30-5:30 Team and individual follow-up meetings with administrators, faculty, students as requested by team members; additional class visits.
- 6:00 Team dinner, access to computers on campus for writing in evening.

#### **Day 4**

- 9:00-12:00 Team and individual follow-up meetings with administrators, faculty, students as requested by team members; additional class visits; access to computers for writing.
- 12:00-1:00 Team lunch.
- 1:00-2:00 Team exit interview with President, others from administrative list at discretion of applicant institution.
- 2:00 Team departs Anytown.

### **3. During the Site Visit: Preliminary Planning Meeting**

The chairman of the site evaluation team will conduct a meeting with all team members shortly after their arrival at the site visit destination, or if necessary by conference call the week preceding the site visit. Purposes for this preliminary meeting include:

- a. setting an appropriate tone for the visit;
- b. identifying salient issues for joint or individual investigation during the site visit;
- c. assigning responsibilities for class visits and individual interviews;
- d. determining preliminary site evaluation report writing assignments.

At this meeting decisions may also be made concerning the extent and types of information to be reviewed or collected on site (e.g., governance documents, class syllabi, evidence of student learning, etc.), and in what cases appropriate sampling can be used (e.g., for faculty credentials; student records, library holdings).

**It is essential that a site evaluation team act in concert during their first hand review of the applicant institution or program, particularly in their representations to officials, faculty, and students of the applicant institution or program.**

**Team members should be especially careful to distinguish between their individual constructive comments and observations, and their responsibilities as evaluators for the Academy.**

**Team members and applicant institutions and programs should be aware at all times that definitive evaluation of compliance with the Academy's *Standards and Criteria*, and the accreditation decision, will be made by the AALE Board of Trustees, upon recommendation of the Council of Scholars, and following a thorough review of application materials including, but not limited to, the self-study, the site team report, and any official responses to the site team report.**

#### **4. During the Site Visit: Questions for Consideration**

Evaluation team members should consider the following questions as the site visit proceeds:

1. Are team members accurately assessing all relevant aspects of the applicant institution's or program's operation?
2. Are team members' interviews and observations reflecting broad involvement by the different segments of the applicant's community?
3. Do team members' observations appear to reveal whether an applicant's learning assessment standards are appropriately designed and implemented to gauge student achievement in liberal learning?
4. Do team members' observations appear to clearly identify the applicant's areas of strength and weakness?
5. Do team members observe a well-understood and coordinated commitment on the part of the applicant to improving all aspects of its operations, especially in areas of weakness identified in the self-study?
6. Are team members' observations permitting them to form an adequate overall impression of the apparent educational, administrative, and financial quality of the applicant, as well as of its prospects, both in light of the Academy's *Standards and Criteria* and of the applicant's own mission and educational objectives?

#### **At the Conclusion of the Site Visit**

During the site visit, evenings are set apart for drafting of the site evaluation visit report. Team chairmen are responsible for seeing that a reasonably complete preliminary draft of the site evaluation visit report has been prepared by the conclusion of the site visit.

1. **On the last evening or morning of the site visit, team members should reach agreement on the proposed overall structure and content of the site visit report.** Team members should also prepare for the exit interview at this time by identifying salient issues arising from the site visit and assigning interview reporting responsibilities.

2. On the last evening or morning of the site visit, an exit interview is conducted between the Academy's evaluation team and representatives of the applicant institution or program, to be selected at the discretion of the applicant's chief executive officer. The team chairman should brief the chief executive officer before the exit interview.

This exit review will provide a concise oral summary of the team's key findings. It is essential that the exit review be consistent in tone and content with the final written evaluation team report. During the exit interview team members typically report general observations, ask final questions, and review salient findings of the team. The Academy staff representative will describe the next steps in the accreditation process, including the requirement that the applicant institution or program to submit factual and substantive responses to the site evaluation team report.

**Please note: The exit interview is not intended to present the detailed findings of the site evaluation team; these will be made available to the applicant institution or program in the form of the completed site visit report. Academy site evaluation teams are specifically asked NOT to offer judgments or opinions concerning the accreditability of an institution or program, or any aspect of an institution or program, at any time during the course of the site visit or in the final site report.**

3. *Before leaving campus, evaluation team members are expected to submit draft reports addressing their areas of responsibility to the team chairman. The team chairman is responsible for assembling a full draft of the report within one week of the conclusion of the site visit, with the assistance of Academy staff. The team chairman also prepares and introduction to the report, concisely describing the institution or program and its salient characteristics and circumstances (see "The Evaluation Team Report" below). When a full draft has been prepared, it is circulated to team members for review, correction, and final approval.*

### **The Evaluation Team Report**

The final report submitted by the site evaluation team to the Academy must represent the considered professional judgment of the team as a whole.

The Academy requires that an evaluation team report include the following items:

1. A narrative introduction concisely summarizing:
  - a) the salient historical and factual circumstances of the applicant;

- b) the recent and current state of the applicant;
- c) salient institutional strengths and areas for improvement or concern;
- d) major issues, challenges, and opportunities facing the applicant in the foreseeable future.

2. A list of the titles (not names) of all institutional officials, committees, and general description of other persons interviewed during the site visit.

For example:

- 1. Chairman of the Board of Trustees
- 2. Members of the Board of Trustees (3)
- 3. President of the College
- 4. Academic Vice President
- 5. Administrative Vice President
- 6. Academic Division Chairmen (3)
- 7. Dean of Students
- 8. Dean of Admissions
- 9. Director of Development
- 10. Director of Business Operations
- 11. Director of Library Services
- 12. Director of Student Support Center
- 13. Director of Athletics
- 14. Director of Housing
- 15. Registrar
- 16. Chair, Institutional Effectiveness Committee
- 17. Accreditation Committee
- 18. Academic Affairs Council
- 19. Student Honor Council
- 20. Various Faculty
- 21. Various Students
- 22. Various Staff

3. A body concisely addressing each of the Academy's standards and criteria in turn, indicating whether the applicant fulfills the Academy's requirements, with support and elaboration wherever appropriate. In determining whether the applicant fulfills each standard or criterion, evaluation team members must decide whether one of three formal notices is appropriate:

- a) An **Indication** is a team's professional judgment that an institution or program appears to face a significant issue in regard to fulfillment of all or part of an accreditation standard or criterion. This judgment should be clearly supported in the narrative. Indications identify significant issues but do not prescribe solutions.
- b) A **Suggestion** offers a course of action that in the team's professional

judgment would result in an improvement of the educational or administrative qualities of the institution or program, although such action is not necessary to fulfill the Academy's requirements.

- c) A **Commendation** indicates that the applicant fulfills one of the Academy's standards or criteria in an exemplary or particularly noteworthy fashion.

4. The names, titles, and institutional affiliation of each evaluation team member.

5. *The required Academy evaluation site report disclaimer:*

*The site evaluation team report and any statements therein regarding compliance with the accreditation standards and criteria of the American Academy for Liberal Education represent only the considered opinion of the evaluation site team members at the time of the visit. Definitive evaluation of compliance and the accreditation decision will be made by the Academy's Board of Trustees, upon recommendation from the Council of Scholars, following a thorough review of application materials including, but not limited to, the self-study, the site evaluation team report, and any official responses to the site team report.*

### **Final Report of the Evaluation Team**

After the visit, and with the assistance of Academy staff, the team chairman edits and combines the individual team member draft reports into a concise, well-organized, articulate document. The resulting draft is distributed to all team members for review, revision, and approval. These steps ensure that the final report represents the synthesized view of all evaluation team members, and helps ensure a balanced presentation. Academy staff review the draft to ensure that it meets the requirements (see above) for an accreditation site report.

Once the combined draft is complete, typically within two weeks of the conclusion of the site evaluation visit, the Academy forwards a copy of the site team report to the applicant institution or program for required factual correction. The applicant should send notice of factual corrections, if any, to the Academy within approximately two weeks of receipt of the draft site report. The evaluation team chairman will incorporate all appropriate corrections in consultation with Academy staff and other evaluation team members as necessary. The corrected document then becomes the final report of the site evaluation team. The Academy forwards the final report to the applicant institution or program for required substantive comment. The applicant should forward its substantive comments to the Academy within approximately two weeks of receipt of the final report.

Once the final report is forwarded to the applicant for substantive comment, the normal duties of the evaluation team members are complete. Evaluation team chairmen may be asked to appear before the Academy's Board of Trustees at the accreditation review meetings for applicant institutions and programs.