

¡Entiéndeme! (Understand me!): Committee shares takeaways from first Spanish language ATS accreditation visit

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It is often assumed that English is the only “official” language in North America. This perception overlooks the cultural and linguistic diversities exhibited in states across the United States and Canada, and the US territories in the Caribbean. For example, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a US territory that has functioned in the Spanish language since 1902. Despite the US government’s ongoing attempts to impose “English only” legislation on the Commonwealth, all education, business, and daily life on the island is conducted in Spanish. The 2000 US Census reported that 95% of the island’s residents are fluent in Spanish, and it noted that 72% of Puerto Ricans spoke English “less than very well.”

In the fall of 2018 (in the wake of Hurricane Maria), the dean of the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico (as it refers to itself), inquired about the possibility of conducting a completely bilingual comprehensive visit where all the oral components of the visit would be in Spanish and all the written texts would be in English. Given that the educational language of the school is Spanish, I understood that the ability to conduct the interviews and conversations with faculty, staff, and students in Spanish



(l-r) Maria Pilar Aquino, Loida Martell, Hugo Magallanes, Eric Barreto, and Elsie Miranda

would provide the accrediting committee a more authentic and efficient process for assessing the reality on the ground. Furthermore, this bilingual arrangement would save the school a significant amount of money in simultaneous translation costs. Immediately, I said, “Claro que si, entiendo.” (Yes, of course, I understand).

As a Cuban-American, one of the skills I bring to my role as director of accreditation at ATS is that I am fully bilingual and bicultural, and I have access to many friends and colleagues within the membership who share these same linguistic and cultural skills. In due time, the committee was assembled. Loida Martell, vice president for academic affairs and dean at Lexington Theological Seminary, would chair the visit along with the following peer reviewers: Maria Pilar Aquino, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and professor emerita of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego; Eric Barreto, associate professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary; and Hugo Magallanes, associate dean for academic affairs at Perkins School of Theology Southern Methodist University.

In the spring of 2020, ATS sent this completely bilingual evaluation committee from across the United States to Puerto Rico for the first bilingual and bicultural comprehensive site visit. We write this reflection en conjunto (*in collaboration*), two days after completing the visit to Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico (SEPR), cognizant of what we understood and mindful of what could have been so easily lost in translation. ¿Entiendes? (*Do you understand?*)

While the experience is fresh on our minds, we acknowledge the significance of the moment into which ATS and the ATS Commission on Accrediting is living. As member schools prepare to vote on the revised *Standards of Accreditation* later this summer, this bilingual reaccreditation visit to Puerto Rico reveals the Association's commitment and attention

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In this case, SEPR's request was not unreasonable because if we [as the ATS membership] are to be a people who embody true diversity and inclusion in theological education, then we must acknowledge the linguistic and cultural diversities in North America and in US territories in the Caribbean—this was an opportunity to do just that. To give credence to these experiences, the committee offered highlights from its visit. The following are paraphrased excerpts from their submissions:

- The profound gratitude expressed by SEPR's staff, faculty, students, alumna, and board members for being allowed to fully articulate their realities, aspirations, hopes, concerns, and challenges without the double barrier of first having to translate what they needed to say internally or rely on the delayed interpretations of translators (a daunting task, both intellectually and emotionally), was humbling. I often take being bilingual for granted, yet in this context,

entendi (*I understood*) how language could be used as a barrier. I learned many things through this experience, but the one that sticks out for me the most is how we all served as bridge builders who could truly listen and be with the school on their own terms, and also to communicate back to them the significance of what the ATS *Standards* are calling them to live into. This was not just about language, but about history, culture, dignity, faith, and life in general.

- I was grateful for the opportunity to take part in this visit with an extraordinary, bilingual team as we evidenced the breadth and depth of cultural diversity found within ATS. Although there were many memorable moments, what impacted me most profoundly took place in a classroom. At the end of a long day,

we were invited to sit in on a class where Puerto Rican students were wrestling deeply with the recently lived experiences of the people and of the island (hurricanes,

earthquakes, political, and economic turmoil), alongside theological reflections on colonialism. Here, Puerto Rico was not an object of study nor one example among many, but rather the students lived realities made up the very context and substance of the conversation. It was then que entendí (*that I understood*) that the value and the vitality of this educational process requires that such spaces exist in the larger ecology of theological education. As a team entendimos (*we understood*), that these core elements of our broader theological reflections cannot be translated or imposed upon students or schools. They need to be culled from the marrow of lived experience, where we desperately need to learn from one another.

- The bilingual/bicultural nature of our team served to affirm and to hold accountable the work and ministry of SEPR. As a committee, we represented

the diversity of the ATS membership and served to affirm the complexity of the current reality in theological education across North America. This bilingual experience highlighted the multitude of persons who navigate their daily lives in more than one language, and it served as an acknowledgment of a theological movement that calls for decentralization of institutions [and of colonizing theologies]. It was truly a joy to serve as a peer reviewer with a team that had the ability to interview so many different people *y entender (and understand)* the expressed views, the silence, the culture, and the power dynamics of a community in its primary language. I am grateful that ATS can model this type of cultural and linguistic accompaniment and hope that this experience can set a precedent of *entendimiento enriquecido (enriched understanding)* for future teams, visiting schools in or of diverse contexts.

- The particularity of Puerto Rico was further embodied with one staff member who, after having served in the Armed Forces, could only effectively communicate in “Spanglish”— what linguists have called “code-switching.” This man had the ability to “cross borders” from one language to another like “rapid fire.” He chose words from both English and Spanish languages to communicate his concerns, using what he felt were the best determiners of meaning at the time. The team was able to listen and fully comprehend this person without getting lost in translation, but this was not always the case in the context of his broader lived experiences. This conversation served as a reminder of the difficulties experienced by others who live continuously in these liminal spaces of linguistic hybridity, who are dismissed simply because they are not understood, or who are ridiculed because they fake understanding to avoid being shamed. *¿Entiendes? (Do you understand?)*



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The opportunity to serve our member schools is always an invitation for growth. As ATS continues to explore new ways to live into its mission—to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public—it becomes increasingly evident that the diverse landscape of graduate theological education will require new ways of attending to the contextual realities of its schools. As the first Hispanic/Latina director of accreditation at ATS, this bilingual reaccreditation visit made me aware of the privilege of being able to serve our Spanish speaking brothers and sisters as an “insider.”

We did our work as a team with humility and grace, accompanying “one of our own” in the hard work of accountability to the *Standards* and to quality assurance. We listened well, we saw, we heard, and we reflected with a community who has endured much hardship. As a team, we raised the hard issues and spoke difficult truths. Throughout the process, the value of cultural competency and a common set of *Standards* amidst a rainbow of denominational, racial, and ethnic diversity proved to be our greatest assets.

This experience can serve to remind us all, that **being with** one another on the path of “promoting, improving, and enhancing the quality and sustainability of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public” requires an abiding set of *Standards*, deep listening, and understanding. *¡Entiendo! (I understand!)* This level of mutual understanding and accountability is what all of our schools—regardless of location or missional identity—may ask of us at ATS. More than ever, I believe we can collectively say “entendido” (*understood*).