Site Evaluation Visits

Site evaluations are held in accordance with Rule 4 of the ABA Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools. Generally, site evaluations occur when a law school applies for provisional approval, in years two and four following provisional approval, when a law school applies for full approval, in the third year following full approval, and every tenth year thereafter.

A site team of qualified persons is appointed by the Managing Director’s Office to conduct the site evaluation. In addition to the chair, the team will normally include a lawyer, judge or public member, a university administrator, and several persons who are members of the faculty or staff at other law schools. This composition is not required, and some teams may therefore not consist of this exact line-up of professionals.

Visits scheduled for fall 2020 and likely spring 2021 will take place virtually. A follow-up in-person visit by a limited team will take place when travel and visits are feasible. In addition, a new document will be utilized that combines the SEQ narrative responses (provided by the law school) and the site evaluation report template (“SRT”) responses (provided by the site team) into a single document, the “SEQ-SRT” form. That document is described in detail in the SEQ-SEQ form and Instructions.

Accreditation Review

The Council determines whether a fully approved law school complies with the Standards and whether a provisionally approved law school substantially complies with the Standards and has a reliable plan for coming into full compliance. When a law school applies for provisional approval or a provisionally approved law school applies for full approval, the Council conducts its usual review of the law school, and makes a determination whether a school shall receive provisional or full approval.

Materials

Under prior practice, six weeks in advance of the site evaluation, the law school provided each team member with a completed Self Study, which included narrative responses to the questions set out in the Site Evaluation Questionnaire (“SEQ”). Beginning this year with the virtual site visits, law schools will provide the Self Study to the Office eight weeks prior to the visit, with the SEQ responses provided on the new SEQ-SRT form. The staff will then complete an initial review of the completed SEQ narrative responses to determine where the information provided appears sufficient to enable the Council to make its determination as to compliance or non-compliance with the Standards and where further information likely is required. This initial review will be done on the SEQ-SRT form and will help direct the attention of the site team to collecting the additional information the Council will need to make its determination. NOTE: The initial review by the staff is NOT a determination of compliance or non-compliance with the Standards. It is simply an initial review to assess whether the information necessary to make that determination is provided by the SEQ responses in the SEQ-SRT form. Similarly, the site team simply collects information that may be incomplete in the SEQ responses—the site team provides that information so the Council can make the
determination of compliance or non-compliance. Neither the staff nor the site team determines compliance or non-compliance with the Standards.

Following the staff review of the SEQ-SRT form, the SEQ-SRT form with the initial staff review will be provided to the chair of the site team. The law school will also receive a copy of the SEQ-SRT form with the initial staff review so it is aware of particular areas that may require additional information to be provided to the site team during the visit.

Instructions for completion of the 2020-2021 Self Study are located on the Section’s website at: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/questionnaire.html

The Managing Director’s Office will make available an electronic copy of materials including this Procedures for Site Evaluation Visits and the 2020-2021 ABA Standards and Rules of Procedure for the Approval of Law Schools.

Team Conference Room

For virtual visits, there obviously will be no physical team meeting room. The Managing Director’s Office will provide access to a Zoom account that can be used for team meetings and individual meetings among team members. To protect confidentiality, that Zoom account should be used for such meetings. For meetings with faculty members and law school staff, the law school can set up any required Zoom (or other platform) calls. Materials typically available in hard copy in the team office at the law school (the Self Study and the materials that are required by the Self Study to be available onsite) will be available electronically. The school should make exams and scholarship available electronically by setting up a Dropbox or similar option so that team members can easily access these materials. The law school should provide the administrative support required by the team during the site evaluation to set up Zoom calls and access electronic materials.

Schedule

Site evaluations conducted on site typically are scheduled for a three-day period; this will be true for virtual site visits as well. The site team chair will arrange the specific dates with the dean of the law school, making sure that the president/chief executive officer is available. Site evaluations most often begin on Sunday afternoon and conclude by noon on Wednesday, although some may begin on Wednesday and conclude by noon on Saturday. As with in person visits, for virtual visits, each member of the site evaluation team should be available during the entire site evaluation without competing business or personal appointments. This includes evenings when the team will meet (via Zoom for virtual visits) to review the information gathered during the day and to plan the next day’s business. The full attention and engagement of each site evaluator is essential to ensure the integrity of the law school approval process and fairness to the institution. A sample schedule is attached as Appendix 1.

Pre-Visits

A “pre-visit” by the site team chair in the form of Zoom meetings with the dean and other administrators is essential for virtual visits. In advance of the formal site evaluation the site chair should spend at least part of a day confirming the arrangements, including the technology to be used, and discussing with the dean and others certain key issues for the law school. Sometimes, the pre-visit will focus on particular matters the chair and the dean expect to be
central to the review (e.g., admissions, bar passage, or finances). With the new initial review process for the SEQ-SRT form, issues will have been identified by the staff that the site team will be focusing on.

Conference Calls

The chair of the site team should schedule one or more conference calls with members of the site evaluation team before the virtual site visit begins. The materials supplied by the law school and the initial review by the staff may suggest matters requiring special attention or special preparation prior to the team's arrival at the school. The chair should also make sure the team members are prepared to use the technology required for a virtual visit. The chair should also stress the necessity of scheduling all the virtual meetings each team member will need to have with law school faculty and staff prior to the dates of the virtual visit and should devise a process by which team members will notify the chair of the meetings they have arranged.

Initial Team Meeting

For virtual visits, it may be convenient for both the team members and the school to schedule some of the Zoom meetings required for the visit (with individual faculty members or administrators) to take place before the official site visit dates. The site chair should discuss the possibility of such meetings with the dean and make clear that it is the law school’s option whether any meetings that are part of the actual visit should take place prior to dates of the visit. Prior to the start date of the virtual site evaluation, the meeting that traditional took place on site as the “initial team meeting” should take place virtually. The chair may want to schedule this meeting well in advance of the start date if team members will be having meetings with law school personnel in advance of the virtual visit. The team should discuss the site evaluation process and team members’ preliminary impressions of the school. It is the chair’s responsibility to ensure that each team member understands the role of the site evaluation and the site team’s report in the review of the law school’s program. During this time, the chair should confirm individual tasks of team members.

Opening Conversation

The day or evening before the virtual site visit begins, the site team should have a conversation with the dean and key administrators to give the team an opportunity to get an overview of the school’s program, including strengths and possible weaknesses. This conversation with the dean, the school's assessment of its opportunities and needs, and the data supplied through the completed Self Study as well as the initial review by the staff should permit the team to decide what matters need special attention.

Day-to-Day Activities

The balance of the time during the virtual site visit is left open for team members to do the work that must be done to gather the facts and observations needed to complete the SEQ-SRT form thoroughly and accurately. Team members will make every effort to meet individually with each member of the faculty and administrative staff. As mentioned above, these meetings must be scheduled in advance, although follow up meetings or meetings with individuals the team member learns during the visit may be able to supply information the team member requires can certainly be arranged during the days the virtual visit takes place. Unfortunately, the virtual visit process does not permit team members to visit classes taught by the normal mode of instruction.
when the school has made pandemic-related adjustments nor to spend time with students in informal ways. Those visits and interactions will take place when the in-person follow up visit occurs. But as discussed below, at least a small sample of distance education courses should be visited and sufficient meetings should be arranged to allow the team members to gain an understanding of a school’s clinical programs, including field placement programs, and to evaluate the library and its services, student services, financial resources, and administrative services at the law school.

Team members can confer by phone or Zoom with each other throughout the day and, particularly, at the end of each day, including at the team’s nightly meeting, to compare impressions and to plan any additions to the next day's activities. Something that one of the team members learned during the day may dictate a modification in the plans initially made for the next day's schedule. Finally, it is important to reserve adequate time in which to prepare for the exit meetings with the dean and the president/chief executive officer. That preparation often takes place at the team's meeting on the evening prior to the exit meetings.

Team members should make every attempt to gather all relevant information during the site evaluation visit. If necessary, after the site evaluation visit, they may contact faculty and administrators to gather additional facts or information necessary to complete the SEQ-SRT form. As a courtesy, a team member should notify the team chair of these contacts. It is not appropriate, however, to share drafts of the SEQ-SRT form with school representatives.

**Key Elements of the Site Evaluation**

1. **Meetings with the President or Chief Executive Officer**

   Two meetings with the president or chief executive officer of the institution typically are scheduled, one at the beginning of the site evaluation and one at the end. For virtual visits, these meetings should take place through a Zoom call. The dean attends the first meeting, but typically does not attend the second meeting. It is not mandatory that the president attend the first meeting if the provost or other senior official is present.

   The first meeting gives the team an opportunity to ask those questions that study of the school’s materials has suggested, such as issues concerning the relationship between the university and law school, poor student outcomes, or financial concerns. The purpose of the second meeting with the president/chief executive officer is to summarize the team’s findings. The team should review significant strengths and weaknesses in the law school program. Any concerns that are likely to be noted in the SEQ-SRT form should be covered so that the report does not contain any surprises.

   In these meetings, the team should emphasize that the purpose of its report is to report facts and observations and not to determine whether the school complies with the Standards. Accreditation decisions are the responsibility of the Council. In making its findings and conclusions with respect to compliance with the Standards, the Council will consider the SEQ-SRT form and other relevant information submitted by the school. As a general rule, the team should not offer peer advice to the school unless specifically requested.

   These meetings with the president/chief executive officer do not preclude other meetings with the administrators outside the law school. For example, it is common for a team member to
meet with the vice president for academic affairs about appointment and promotion practices and with the vice president for finance about budgeting.

2. Meeting with the Dean

The team or the chair meets with the dean before the exit interview with the president/chief executive officer to discuss the report that the team will give to the president. Again, this meeting should take place via a Zoom call on virtual visits.

As with the meeting with the president/chief executive officer, the team should be clear that accreditation decisions are the responsibility of the Council, not the site team. The meeting with the dean should also identify any concerns that the team will discuss in the SEQ-SRT form so that the form will not contain any surprises.

3. Class Visits

As noted above, class visits normally conducted during a site visit will not be conducted during the virtual visit. Those will occur during the follow-up visit required to be held. However, the team should “visit” a small sample of classes (three to five by each team member) being taught remotely to ensure that the requirements for providing distance education are followed. Reviewing copies of student evaluations also may provide some insights into general patterns or practices. Class visitation is part of the general assessment of the quality of the educational program of the institution. It can reveal important things concerning whether the classroom work is sufficiently rigorous, demanding, and of high quality. All members of the team share the responsibility for class visits. Reports on class visits will be collected and reviewed by the person responsible for completing the faculty section of the SEQ-SRT form. The site team should do its best to observe at least some professional skills programs, live client clinics, legal writing classes, distance education classes, and field placement programs. Appendix 2 is a sample form for reporting on these visits.

4. Faculty Conferences

The site evaluation team should make its best efforts to meet with each member of the full-time faculty, which will be done with phone or Zoom calls during virtual visits. In order to provide an opportunity for all members of the faculty to meet with a team member, all members of the team will participate in faculty visits. The team member completing the faculty section of the SEQ-SRT form should collect and review reports from other team members on these meetings by having the team members scan the documents and email them. Appendix 3 is a sample form for reporting on visits with faculty members.

5. Student Conferences

The schedule will include an open meeting, at a convenient time, for students. The schedule may include a Zoom meeting with a group of student leaders. In the meetings with students, the team should specifically inquire into the school’s strengths and possible weaknesses as well as any complaints and praise the students may have regarding the school’s program of legal education and student services, including the distance education courses and virtual services being offered during the pandemic emergency.
6. Conferences with Members of the Administrative Staff

Members of the site evaluation team should confer with members of the law school’s administrative staff through phone or Zoom calls. Inquiries should be made regarding such matters as law school admissions and financial aid, law school retention practices, law school placement policies, and law school grievance procedures. A review of the school's policies and records in each of these areas should be undertaken to elicit facts that will assist in determining compliance with the Standards and whether the school's actual practices comport with its stated policies. Meetings also should be held with the law school's development staff to discuss their efforts and goals, their plans for reaching them, and the relationship between development efforts and the school’s general financial future. Meetings with administrative staff can take place prior to the dates of the visit with consent of the school. Meeting with administrative staff must be completed prior to the final team meeting.

7. Dual Division Schools

Teams that visit schools that have substantial programs or scheduling options other than a traditional full-time day program should make particular efforts to observe a reasonable number of classes in each program and to talk with students in each program or scheduling option. This may require, for example, scheduling more than one open meeting with students.

8. Meeting with Board of Visitors, Alumni, and Other Members of the Bar

A meeting with leaders of the school's support groups, such as the law alumni association, the board of visitors, local and state bar associations, and members of the bench can sometimes help the team understand how the school is viewed by those groups and it also may help the school explain its position to those outside constituencies. Such meetings are not required, and the chair will confer with the dean about whether to have such any such meetings.

Site Evaluation Report (SEQ-SRT form)

The site team will complete a report using the new single document SEQ/SRT form (site evaluation questionnaire/site evaluation report template). See SEQ-SRT form and Instructions.

The SEQ-SRT form should be completed as soon as possible. Delays in preparation of the SEQ-SRT form are unfair to the law school, create problems for the Council, and make it more difficult to complete the SEQ-SRT form. The chair will advise team members when to submit their portions of the SEQ-SRT form to the chair so that the SEQ-SRT form can be finalized within four weeks of the site evaluation visit.

The chair of the team will transmit the completed SEQ-SRT form electronically to the Managing Director’s Office by uploading it in the Dashboard.

The chair shall not distribute the SEQ-SRT form to the school or other accrediting agencies or member organizations. Members of the team shall consider the SEQ-SRT form to be a confidential document and shall not share it with others. Team members should be extraordinarily careful in discussing the site evaluation with colleagues or others. In particular, no team member should convey to anyone any criticisms that the individual or team has of the school that was visited. This is true even if the name of the school is not mentioned as the dates
of the visits for all schools is public information so if an issue is mentioned the school can readily be identified.

As is currently done, the Managing Director’s Office will conduct an internal review of the SEQ-SRT form completed by the team. In connection with the internal review, the chair may be asked to amplify or modify certain portions as part of the review, so that the SEQ-SRT form will provide the Council with the information needed to determine the school’s compliance with the Standards. The SEQ-SRT form may also be reviewed by the ABA General Counsel’s office to ensure its adherence to post-Consent Decree compliance and other legal matters. Following these reviews, the final version of the SEQ-SRT form becomes the Site Report, which the Managing Director will forward to the law school and, if the law school is an AALS member, to the AALS.

The law school dean and university president or chief executive officer will review the Site Report and will be offered an opportunity to respond to it. This response may correct factual mistakes in the Site Report or include new information occurring after the site evaluation that may be germane to one or more of the team’s observations.

The dean and president or chief executive officer will send any response to the Site Report to the Managing Director, who will distribute it to members of the site evaluation team. The comments from the school will be forwarded along with the Site Report to the Council.

Team members will get a copy of the Site Report, the school’s response, and the Council’s decision letter so that they can be informed of the outcome of the process that included their site evaluation. Team members should not discuss with the school matters relating to the content of the Site Report or the action of the Council. Schools should refrain from asking team members for their reaction or response to parts of the Site Report or the Council’s decision letter.

Document Retention

As a general rule, team members should retain site evaluation materials and notes until the Council conducts its review of the Site Report. Receipt of the Council’s decision letter will signal that the review has taken place. At that point, all hard copies of documents related to the visit should be shredded and electronic copies should be deleted.

Evaluation of the Site Evaluation Process

The deans of visited law schools and the members of the site evaluation teams are asked to complete confidential evaluations of the site team and the site evaluation process, as well as for suggestions on how the site evaluation process may be improved. These evaluations will be sent by the Managing Director’s Office.

Confidentiality

The Rules of Procedure for the Approval of Law Schools make clear that, in general, all matters relating to the accreditation of a law school are confidential. While site inspectors may report to colleagues that they were part of a site evaluation team to a particular school or program, they should refrain from offering any but the most general report or comment on the law school.
Law schools may choose to release information about the site evaluation, the Site Report, and the decision letter as permitted in Rules 47 to 49 of the *Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools (2020-2021)*.

**AALS Membership Review Process**

Most ABA-approved law schools are also members of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). The AALS conducts its membership review process in parallel with the ABA review process. This minimizes the burden on law schools. If the site evaluation is to a school that is an AALS member school, then one member of the ABA site evaluation team is appointed by the AALS. This person is a full member of the ABA site evaluation team and will participate in all of the team’s work, including drafting portions of the SEQ-SRT form.

The AALS representative prepares a separate report for the AALS that addresses that organization’s specific concerns. The Managing Director’s Office provides a copy of the ABA Site Report to the AALS. The AALS Membership Review Committee uses these two reports in determining whether a law school is operating in compliance with the AALS membership requirements. The AALS representative’s separate report is not provided to members of the site evaluation team, including the team chair, or to the Managing Director’s Office.
# Site Evaluation Schedule – Sample

## Sunday
- **2:00-4:30 p.m.** Initial team meeting
- **4:30 p.m.** Team Meeting with Dean, Senior Law School Administrators.

## Monday
- **9:00-10:00 a.m.** Entrance meeting with University President/Chief Executive Officer, Provost, or other senior official. (optional to include Dean)
- **10:00-3:00 p.m.** Team Meetings with Faculty and Staff
- **3:00-4:00 p.m.** Open meeting with Students. [Note: If the school has an evening division, the schedule should include an opportunity to meet with evening students.]
- **4:00-6:00 p.m.** Team Meeting

## Tuesday
- **8:00 a.m.-Noon** Team Meetings with Faculty and Staff
- **1:00—2:00 p.m.** Team Meeting
- **2:00-5:00 p.m.** Team Meetings with Faculty and Staff
- **5:00-6:00 p.m.** Team Meeting.

## Wednesday
- **7:30-9:15 a.m.** Chair/Team meeting with Dean.
- **9:30-11:00 a.m.** Meeting with University President/Chief Executive Officer, Provost, or other senior official.
- **11:00-11:30 a.m.** Team meeting, follow-up with any remaining questions or issues, and initial consideration of SEQ-SRT form.
- **Noon** Visit ends
Appendix 2

DISTANCE EDUCATION CLASS VISIT REPORT

1. Course Name:

2. Instructor:

3. Evaluator:

4. Date of Visit:     Arrived:    Departed:

5  a. Approximate number of students attending:
b. Number registered:

6. Briefly describe the technology used to conduct the class. Was it effective?

7. How is attendance monitored for the class?

8. If you were present at the start of the class, did it begin on time? Did students arrive on time?

9. The general subject matter considered in the class:

10. Did the instructor interact with the students and did the class actively participate in the discussion (through Socratic dialogue, break-out rooms, etc.)?

11. Was the class intellectually stimulating and rigorous?

12. Did the instructor appear prepared and able to effectively utilize the technology?

13. Did the students appear prepared and interested in the class, and were they able to effectively utilize the technology?

14. Additional strong or weak points concerning the class:

15. Other comments on the class or the technology:

19 Overall impression of the class on a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest):

Appendix 3

FACULTY OFFICE VISIT – SAMPLE REPORT FORM

Faculty member visited:
Site evaluator:

Date, day, approximate time of visit:

Faculty member’s comments on teaching responsibilities (course assignments, teaching load, scheduling, classrooms, technology for distance education courses, quality of students, students’ preparation for class, faculty programs regarding teaching, in particular distance education teaching, and the improvement of teaching):

Faculty member’s comments on research responsibilities (support for scholarship, intellectual environment, collegial support for research and scholarship, information resources, technology, communications of expectations by administration):

Faculty member’s comments on service responsibilities (encouragement of service; committee structure; committee assignments; work with university, legal profession, or community groups; pro bono work; etc.):

Faculty member’s comments on collegiality, governance, faculty/administration relations (including faculty role in self study and strategic planning, rank and tenure process, annual reviews or post-tenure reviews, etc.):

Other comments and concerns about the law school, its mission, its operation, facilities, etc.: