

Evaluation and Recurring Themes in the Standards

The standards organize these various types of text in two ways. The first, and most obvious, is by the patterns of educational and institutional life: the purpose of the school, its central activities (conducting educational programs involving teaching, learning, and research), the resources necessary to accomplish educational and institutional purposes (faculty, governance, library, financial and other resources), and the characteristics of the degree programs it offers. The second, and less obvious organizational pattern, is by **major, recurring themes woven throughout the standards**, including:

- a priority on planning and evaluation
- the value of inclusion across racial/ethnic and gender lines
- the importance of freedom of inquiry for teaching and learning, and
- the globalization of theological education.

These recurring themes could have been included in the standards as discrete sections, but various deliberations about quality in theological education led to the conclusion that these characteristics are best understood as themes that find expression in a wide range of institutional and educational efforts. Each of these four themes is introduced at one point (evaluation, 1.2.2, 1.2.3; racial/ ethnic, gender inclusion, 2.5; freedom of inquiry, 3.2.2; and globalization, 3.2.4), and subsequently addressed in many other sections. For example, globalization is introduced and defined in Standard 3, “Learning, Teaching, and Research: Theological Scholarship” (3.2.4), and it occurs in Standard 5, “Library and Information Resources” (5.1.2) and in degree program standards, such as the Master of Divinity (A.3.1.2).

While the recurring references to these themes provide the most effective means for understanding their importance to the purposes and practices of theological education, they pose some problems for the accreditation evaluation task. The themes make the standards, by one way of reading them, seem repetitive, and the evaluation that follows the standards one by one, redundant. The standards require a reading that avoids this problem, and a pattern of evaluation that simplifies a complex task, rather than further complicating it.

The most efficient way to conduct the evaluation with regard to these recurring themes is to assign responsibility for the evaluation of a theme to the self-study subcommittee that is responsible for the standard in which the theme is introduced and described. For example, the self-study subcommittee responsible for reviewing the theological school in the context of Standard 2, “Institutional Integrity” should evaluate the school’s overall efforts to “enhance participation of persons of racial/ethnic minorities in institutional life...(and) according to its stated purpose, the school shall seek to address the concerns of women and to increase their participation in theological education” (2.5). The subcommittee should be sensitive to the recurring nature of the theme (5.5.2), (6.1.3), (7.2.4), (8.3.1.3), (8.3.2.3), and consult with the subcommittees evaluating the school in terms of standards 5, 6, 7, and 8. This pattern of review is not the only pattern, and schools may address these themes in a manner appropriate to the school, the force of the standard, and the design of the self-study.

The primary guidance of the Board of Commissioners is that multiple self-study subcommittees should not treat the theme as if it were their primary responsibility. Each subcommittee may have a contribution to make to the evaluation, but only one should coordinate the comprehensive evaluation.