

# Board of Commissioners launches planning effort for next redevelopment of Standards and Procedures

BY DANIEL O. ALESHIRE

At its February meeting, the ATS Board of Commissioners authorized a subcommittee to design a standards redevelopment process for the membership to consider at the 2018 Centennial Biennial Meeting.

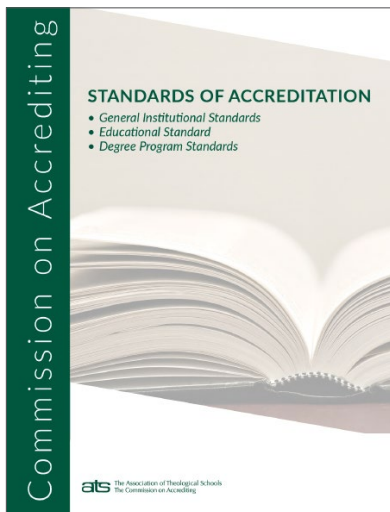
It was just over 20 years ago, in 1996, when members of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) adopted completely redeveloped accrediting standards. The process that led to that action included efforts to define quality in theological education and to develop accrediting standards that embodied that definition. The standards have been modified several times since then—most recently in 2010 and 2012—but the time seems right to undertake the major task of redeveloping the accrediting standards, once again.

Theological education was at a very different place in 1996 than it is now. Institutional structures and practices have changed, educational practices have diversified, new degree programs have been added, existing programs have been modified, the ATS membership has increased by almost 30 percent, and the composition of the enrollment of ATS member schools has changed.

These changes in theological education, coupled with changes in higher education, compelled the Board of Commissioners to adopt a motion earlier this month to authorize a subcommittee of the board to design a process for the redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures of Accrediting.

The board will act on the subcommittee's work in February 2018 and will present a motion to member schools at the 2018 Biennial Meeting to redevelop the standards and procedures. The motion will include a plan for the process by which the redevelopment effort would proceed.

If the Board of Commissioners' anticipated recommendation is approved by member schools, the effort to redevelop the standards will begin in 2018–2019 with information from several Association and Commission efforts.



*“Ongoing evaluation of the standards is built into ATS accrediting. It is part of the regularized evaluation of comprehensive visits by chief executive officers of member schools and chairs of evaluation committees conducted after each comprehensive visit. The board has also had opportunities to evaluate the standards in action through hundreds of visits, reports, and petitions it has reviewed, including more than 100 petitions for exceptions and experiments.”*

—Lester Ruiz, Senior Director of Accreditation and Institutional Evaluation, ATS

The ATS Educational Models and Practices project will contribute four unique kinds of information to this redevelopment process. The first will be the findings of about 20 peer groups that have been exploring the strengths of existing educational practices and the promise of practices newer to theological education. The second will be the findings of a study that is currently underway to identify the kinds of positions in which graduates of ATS schools are employed. The third will be the results of a year-long seminar with persons engaged in other forms of post-baccalaureate education preparing persons for work in human services such as counseling, social work, law, and education. The fourth will be the learnings from innovative programs that have been developed by ATS member schools with funding to be awarded later this year.

The Board of Commissioners will contribute another kind of information. It routinely monitors how accrediting standards are working by its own assessment from interpreting and implementing the standards in the decisions that it makes and by the assessment of

*"We on the Board of Commissioners view our role as that of 'the stewards of the standards.' Our job as this process develops is to ensure that all voices share in an intentional, committed, consultative, and iterative process,"*

—Harry Gardner, Chair of the Board of Commissioners of the ATS Commission on Accrediting

members of evaluation committees and schools that have recently completed self-studies.

Finally, the process will include multiple avenues for membership input such as regional meetings, issue-specific consultations, surveys, and other data-gathering techniques to supplement the wealth of input from the Educational Models and Practices project. While not all of this information will be available in fall 2018, when the redevelopment effort would begin, all of it will be accessible by 2019.

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*Whatever the design for the process to redevelop the standards that the Board of Commissioners will propose in 2018, the work will be the work of the schools.*

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Accrediting standards convey many things. They identify practices and policies that contribute to educational effectiveness

and institutional stability. They embody the expectations of publics that depend on the work of accredited institutions. Perhaps most importantly for theological education, ***the ATS accrediting standards define theological education itself.*** The best definition of an MDiv degree, for example, is the accrediting standard for the MDiv.



Participants at the 2012 ATS Biennial Meeting approved the last major revision to the accrediting standards.

process to redevelop the standards that the Board of Commissioners will propose in 2018, ***the work will be the work of the schools.***

The redevelopment of the standards will not be an exercise in writing the rules by which schools are accredited. It will be an effort—at a particular point in time, in the context of pressing issues in the schools and the communities of faith they serve, in the middle of changes in higher education in general, with awareness of the changing patterns of work and ministry that graduates of ATS schools undertake—to describe what theological education, at its best, should be. ***The redeveloped standards will provide both a bridge and a passageway to the future of accredited theological education.***

For more information or inquiries regarding the redevelopment of the standards, please contact [Lester Edwin J. Ruiz](#), senior director, accreditation and institutional evaluation at ATS, 412-788-6505, ext. 255.



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## Preparatory Committee for the Redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures

**Mignon Jacobs, Chair**

*Fuller Theological Seminary*

**Charles Conniry**

*Portland Seminary of George Fox University*

**Sarah Drummond**

*Andover Newton Theological School*

**Oliver McMahan**

*Pentecostal Theological Seminary*

**Marianne Mount** (public board member)

*Catholic Distance University*

**Polly Stone**

*Reformed Theological Seminary*

**Arch Wong**

*Ambrose Seminary of Ambrose University*

*Commission staff liaisons also serve on the committee. The Chair of the Board of Commissioners may appoint additional members to the committee, as needed.*