

# Five reasons for a comprehensive redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures

By TOM TANNER

*In the March 2018 issue of Colloquy Online, ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada described how the ATS Board of Commissioners has been working the last few years on proposing a motion to the membership at the June 2018 Biennial Meeting in Denver. That motion is to authorize the Board to begin a major revision—what we are calling a comprehensive redevelopment—of the Standards and Procedures. As explained in that article, the last comprehensive redevelopment was in 1996—more than 20 years ago. And as promised in that article, this issue and the upcoming May 2018 issue will provide more information to the membership about the proposed redevelopment process. Listed below are five reasons why the Board believes a comprehensive redevelopment is now warranted.*

**1. The membership indicated in a 2016 survey regarding the search for a new executive director that one of the Association’s highest priorities should be “a revision of accrediting standards to be relevant and flexible and to encourage innovation.”**



**2. The Standards have been revised about every six years, with the last revision in 2010–2012 intended as a transitional strategy until there could be a major redevelopment.**

Only twice in their 80-year history have the Standards undergone a comprehensive redevelopment: the first one in 1972 and the last one in 1996. The last major revision of the Procedures was also in 1996, with some minor revisions in 2014.

**3. ATS membership has changed considerably since the last redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures.**

In 1996, the plurality (45%) of the 232 members were mainline Protestant; two-thirds were freestanding, only 16 offered courses off campus, and none was online. Two decades later, the plurality (44%) of today’s 270

members are evangelical Protestant, barely half (56%) are freestanding, nearly 40% offer courses off campus, and two-thirds now offer courses or programs online. The “typical” student in 1996 was a Caucasian in his 20s pursuing the MDiv. Soon, the typical ATS student—if such exists anymore—could be a person of color, older than 30, taking most classes online or offsite or in ways still emerging. In addition, the number of professional MA programs has jumped from 100 to more than 250 since 1996. In a few years, the MA could replace the MDiv as the primary degree for many ATS schools, given current enrollment, cultural, and denominational trends. In 2016, ATS schools graduated more MA than MDiv students—for the first time in the Association’s 100-year history.

#### ***4. One of the major goals of the \$7 million Educational Models and Practices Project, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., has been “to inform a substantive redevelopment of the Standards.”***

That four-year project (2015–2018) has involved more than 245 member schools—sharing information, exploring new approaches, and gathering to discuss current and developing educational models and practices of ATS schools, including how those should inform a new set of Standards. The project also includes an analysis of issues being discussed in graduate professional education fields similar to ATS, data about the range and nature of positions assumed by graduates of ATS schools, and more than 100 reports from 80 member schools about their innovative programming and faculty development efforts to facilitate new educational models. (See [Educational Models and Practices Project webpage](#) for a list of reports and articles published to date on lessons learned from the project.)

#### ***5. The ATS Board of Commissioners regularly engages in substantive and intentional re-view of the Standards through such avenues as accreditation visits and reports, surveys of schools and evaluation committees, and petitions for exceptions and experiments.***

Information about the current Standards has also been

gathered via presentations and workshops by accrediting staff at more than a dozen ATS and ATS-related events (e.g., ADME and ATLA). Some of the concerns raised since the last revision of the Standards include these observations:

- Many of the current Standards seem overly detailed and too de-limiting, focused more on specific institutional practices than on quality educational principles.
- The literary approach to the text of the current Standards can be confusing (e.g., shall vs. should language); most accrediting standards use simple declarative sentences.
- Some of the Institutional Standards do not reflect the broad and emerging contexts of our schools as well as they might. For example, the Standard on faculty has little to say about the growing role of adjuncts or how faculty roles are being redefined (e.g., the role of church- and field-based faculty), and the Standard on students offers more of a collection of practices rather than an overarching philosophy or educational principles for student services.
- The Educational Standard seems overly prescriptive in areas (e.g., extension and distance education) and privileges certain educational models more than others, regardless of outcomes.
- The Degree Program Standards seem overly duplicative in places and overly prescriptive at times, with increasing questions about the need for ten different degree standards.
- The growing number of exceptions (see [list](#) of nearly 150 granted since the last revision in 2012) raises questions about how “normative” the current Standards are—especially regarding residency.
- The current Standards lack explicitly stated core values and assumptions to help guide in their overall interpretations (e.g., respecting member schools’ unique missions and theological commitments, or the priority of improvement over compliance).

Stating such things explicitly may be increasingly important, given recent external efforts to redefine the role of accreditation as primarily providing consumer protection or ensuring graduates have well-paying careers to pay off student loans.



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