

ATS Annual Report Forms and ATS Standards relate in several ways

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What does it matter that the new ATS Standards of Accreditation reduced ten degree categories to six? What are the implications for how schools collect and use data? The redeveloped Standards were approved by the membership in June 2020, and data collection under this new set began that fall. Degree categories aren't the only changes, however, that affected data collection in the ATS Annual Report Form (ARF) process; they are just the tip of the ARF-Standards iceberg.

The ARF and the *Standards of Accreditation* have a long history together, dating back to the very first standards in 1938, when schools had to complete 18 “schedules” (precursor to the ARF) to be accredited. (The “schedules” substituted for self-study reports until the 1960s). The redevelopment of the *Standards* in 2020 and the current comprehensive revision of the ARF provide occasion to consider the relationship between these two important elements of membership in ATS. There are many areas of overlap and convergence, and a few places where they diverge. All bear upon data collection and use, and the need to collect accurate data.

Similar ARF revision and Standards redevelopment processes

The processes of reimagining and comprehensively updating these essential elements of membership and regulation are strikingly similar. They are both once-in-a-generation projects, involving and affecting the entire membership of schools, with the purpose of benefiting all schools and the industry of theological education. Both projects sought and—in the case of the ARF revision—are continuing to seek input from a broad range of schools



via a representative (ARF revision) advisory committee, focus group sessions, interviews of key informants at ATS schools, feedback forms, and dedicated (ARF) email accounts. Both projects were prompted by the need to simplify and streamline for better use and consumption, as well as to reflect new realities, such as increasing numbers of schools offering online education and additional categories of data.

The ARF revision process is using a principle-based approach, similar to the *Standards* redevelopment. From its first meeting, the ARF revision advisory committee has encouraged a focus on *why* data collection is important, foregrounding this discussion on purposes, before engaging in any conversation about *what* data are collected or *when*. Findings from one of the ARF revision process's associated research projects have also underscored an important purpose of collecting *accurate* data—namely,

peer comparisons. Such comparisons are pointless unless peer schools report updated and accurate data.

Another important principle guiding the ARF revision process is “Lowest Common Multiple.” While the primary goal of the comprehensive revision is to simplify, we recognize that schools have expanded their programs, student bodies, and targeted markets in many ways. Such expansion requires a mechanism to capture an ever-expanding variety of data points, but how can the process attend to both expanding realities and simplifying forms at the same time? How can a single set of forms prompt data collection that would allow for meaningful comparisons across a broad range of schools?

The principle of Lowest Common Multiple provides a critical guideline: **include items that allow all schools to account for their basic categories, but not all their categories.** It is not a lowest-common-factor approach that would only allow for categories shared across all schools, amounting to very few, given the diversity and complexity of the ATS membership. Conversely, it is not an account-for-every-possibility approach, which would make the ARF process unwieldy beyond usefulness. In other words, Lowest Common Multiple allows for inclusion of expanding realities at the same time that it helps to simplify the process and forms.

How ARF revision builds on Standards redevelopment

The ARF revision continues the *Standards* redevelopment in three important ways.

First, the new *Standards* now have different degree categories, simplifying them from ten to six. This change, while welcomed and necessary, does have implications for data collection and longitudinal trend lines. For example, we can no longer collect data on very specialized degree programs, such as music or missiology

degrees. However, those degrees were already becoming increasingly rare, with less than five percent of the membership offering them. This simplification of degree categories fits the principle of Lowest Common Multiple.

Secondly, the new *Standards* also require collection of additional information, such as the number of students admitted to master’s degrees without baccalaureates and the number admitted to the DMin without an MDiv.

While the new *Standards* no longer have arbitrary limits in these areas, it seemed wise to collect data on how schools were

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implementing these new “no-limit” *Standards* to monitor their implementations. The new *Policies and Procedures* (adopted by the membership along with the new *Standards*) also set new definitions for additional locations (formerly extension sites) and distance (online) education, which need to be reflected in a revised ARF.

Thirdly, the ARF revision advisory committee, along with ATS research staff, are also considering changes that would establish a closer connection between data collected in the accreditation process and institutional data collected annually. In another research project associated with the ARF revision, preliminary findings show that while ATS collects robust data well beyond those of its counterpart accrediting agencies, a key area of difference with these agencies is that the current ARF does not focus as strongly on areas often related to student outcomes. For example, while the ARF has collected data on graduation and placement rates for nearly a decade, it does not collect data on retention rates (partly due to confusion on how to define “retention.”). In addition, other agencies often mirror IPEDS definitions and data collection methods (used by all Title IV participants), while ATS has historically used its own definitions and requested different data. Aligning the ARF with IPEDS would help simplify the process for most ATS member schools.

How ARF revision and Standards redevelopment differ

Among the differences between the two processes are the additional audiences the ARF revision must take into consideration in its proposed changes. Both the *Standards* redevelopment and the ARF revision addressed and are addressing the needs and requests of school decision-makers. The ARF revision must also attend to other organizations to which schools report data, such as the National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS data), regional accreditors, and denominations and their various judicatories. Each of these entities requests different kinds of data at various levels of detail. Finding ways to streamline data collection will be important for the revision.

Beyond agencies requesting data, researchers in the industry of theological education look for data that will help them and the schools see patterns underlying the data, such as type of school or individual. Seeing how numbers of Latino/a students have been growing—not uniformly, but in certain types of schools—during the

last decade is important for the industry to recognize, for example. Do the patterns occur by school size, ecclesial family, geographic region, or something else? How is growth related to admissions? Which types of schools have the most effective applicant-to-enrollment rates for Latino/a students? Answering such questions requires data currently not collected in the ARF. How important is it to add these data fields to the ARF? Would it be extra work for the schools or do they already collect such data? These are some of the ways the ARF revision process extends beyond the *Standards* redevelopment.

The information-gathering phase will conclude in early fall and the implementation phase will begin on its heels, with construction of a new set of ARF forms—a full draft that will be distributed publicly to the membership.

Before then, later this summer, initial section drafts will be shared with those most familiar with respective sections to gather additional feedback. We welcome input on the ARF comprehensive revision—please use arfmil@ats.edu at any time.



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