

ATS ‘four core values’: rooted in the past and looking to the future

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has statements of mission and vision, both of which are reviewed regularly and modified as appropriate. As noted in the [article on the ATS mission](#) in the February 2026 issue of Colloquy, the Association’s current mission statement and the statement of purpose for the Commission on Accrediting (COA) are deeply rooted in the organization’s past. Similarly, while ATS formally named its four core values fairly recently, those values reflect emphases that are threaded throughout its history.

Early statements

The first meeting of the Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in 1918 concluded with the following prayer:

“The Conference reverently records its sense of deep gratitude to God” and “its earnest prayer that by the grace of the Divine Spirit and in the name of the Lord, the Head of the Church, this Conference may grow in strength, become a permanent institution, and contribute beyond our present measure to the equipment of the ministry of the gospel and the uniting in one holy service of the separate positions of the Church of Christ.”¹

In 1958, the Commission on Accrediting presented the following rationale for the implementation of a regular cycle of re-accreditation visits:

“The proposed visits are not part of a ‘policing’ operation to see whether a school deserves accreditation...They are not designed to make all schools alike...They will presuppose, on the part of visitors and visited, humility of minds in search of truth and gentleness of hearts dedicated to a high common purpose...There will be no condescension



nor stubbornness, but a will to find ways of increased effectiveness. There will be a realization on the part of the visitors that in each school they are likely to discover contributions to our common life that no other is making, and awareness on the part of the school that it has much to learn from the experience of others...The proper independence of each theological school is abused unless each member of this body contributes to the life and health of every other part.

“Because we belong to this Association, we belong to each other. As a group of schools, we are responsible to our Lord, to His Church, to human society, and to each other for the kind and quality of theological education our schools are promoting...We must move forward together in the advancement of theological education.”²

A half-century later, former ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire’s report to the ATS Executive Committee in 1999 stressed the importance of leadership to facilitate improvement within ATS schools and placed it high on the agenda for future work. He said, “I believe leadership education should be the area of greatest development during 2000–06. Next to accreditation, effective education for

administrators and faculty is the Association's most direct way of contributing to the improvement of theological education."³

These representative statements of ATS purposes and values provide the context for a more formal statement of core values.

Four 'core' or 'key' values⁴

Drawing on the Association's rich history, the four core values currently named on the ATS website emerged through a board process in November 2007. The deliberation was embedded within a broader strategic planning discussion about the Association's future work.

A survey of board members and the ATS professional staff involving three open-ended questions facilitated the board's identification and discussion of core values:

1. What do you believe are the top five core values for ATS?
2. What does ATS say that it values, but does not act upon?
3. What other core values should ATS consider that don't seem to be currently held core values?⁵

To prepare for the survey, Aleshire defined "core values" as "the traits, beliefs, or qualities that are considered most important to the ATS; they represent highest priorities and deeply held driving forces as an organization. Core values reflect the values by which an organization should organize its work; allocate its resources; and relate to individuals and institutions." Reflecting the recent formation of two corporations within ATS, Aleshire instructed the board members that "we are exploring the values of the ATS office and staff, not the entire membership structure" and "to think of program and service work of the Association, rather than the accreditation work of the Commission."⁶

Question number 1, "What do you believe are the top five core values for ATS?" received 22 responses. Grouping similar responses permitted four leading values to emerge:⁷

1. "Respect for diverse religious traditions."
2. "Leadership/professional development of senior administrators in schools" and "the leadership of women and persons of color."
3. "Quality/excellence" and "improvement of schools."
4. "Collegiality and peer learning; community of schools."

These four, with brief explanatory statements, were affirmed by the board in April 2008:

Diversity. ATS values the different expressions of faith that are represented by member schools and seeks to respect the varying understandings of theology, polity, religious leadership, and social commitments.

Quality and improvement. ATS schools value quality in the practice of ministry and in educational practices. Quality is always linked to improvement; even schools that have achieved a high degree of quality can improve. The Association encourages schools to advance in quality.

Collegiality. ATS values the contributions that schools make to one another. Regardless of differences in theological perspective, organizational complexity, or institutional size, ATS schools, as peer institutions, can learn from one another, cooperate on common tasks that benefit the broader community of theological schools, and hold themselves accountable to common practices and quality.

Leadership. ATS values leadership and considers it essential for schools to attain their missions. ATS is committed to developing the skills and capacities of administrators, faculties, and boards of member schools.

The board also included a summary paragraph with a "second tier of values" that had emerged from the discussion:

"In addition to these core values, the Association values formal education for ministerial leadership and advocates on behalf of its benefits for religious leaders, religious institutions, and the work of religion in broader publics; values justice in society and institutions and seeks to embody justice in its organizational life; and values accountability for student learning."⁸

2020 review and revision

In 2019 and 2020, the ATS Board of Directors reviewed the core values. While all four values were affirmed and maintained as primary for the work of ATS, and the explanatory statements of three were retained without change, the board revised the explanatory statement concerning “diversity.” The original statement from 2007 described how ATS “values different expressions of faith” represented by the member schools and “seeks to respect the varying understandings of theology, polity, religious leadership, and social commitments.” This reflects the reality of theological differences among the schools and the differing outworking of those theological beliefs in religious life, while aspiring to engage them in a unity of purpose.⁹

After extensive discussion of the core values at the December 2019 meeting, the board formed a Diversity Core Value working group of four board members and the ATS executive director. The working group discussed revision to the statement, gathered input from members of the ATS staff, and proposed a revised text. After additional online input from board members, the full board approved the current statement during its online meeting in April 2020—just weeks after travel had been suspended by the outbreak of COVID-19. The discussions included both affirmation of the term “diversity” as well as the problems attached to its use.

The revised statement seeks to reflect the understanding of diversity found in the draft proposal of the 2020 *Standards of Accreditation*. Standard 1.5 places diversity within the context of the expectation of institutional integrity and requires each school to have a “publicly available stance on diversity,” describing the school’s “understanding of and commitment to this membership-wide shared value,” and instructing each school to use that stance “to enhance its diversity.”¹⁰ While requiring a stated stance concerning diversity and ongoing enhancement of that reality, the standard introduces greater flexibility into the implementation of that stance depending on the school’s context, including its “history, constituency, and theological commitments.”

The revised core value affirms that diversity “is a visible sign of God’s intention for humanity as revealed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures,” and notes the “multiple forms of diversity” found in member schools. The revision expects each school “to continuously define and demonstrate its own commitment to diversity.” It repeats the language of the standard that this should be done within the context of each school’s “mission, history, constituency...and theological commitments,” while also adding the school’s “educational practices” and “structures.”

A strength of the original statement was its understanding of the common work of the member schools and the desire to value different expressions of faith, and the manifestation of those differences in theology, polity, religious leadership, and social commitments. A strength of the revised statement is its encouragement to the schools, within the contexts of mission and theological tradition, to broaden their understandings of diversity and to continue growing in that area.

The values in practice

Diversity

A significant development toward enhancing the practices of diversity across the schools is the revised 2020 Standard 1.5. The standard weaves diversity into the fabric of a school’s integrity and provides the flexibility for each school to define and demonstrate diversity within its particular context and theological tradition.

Quality and improvement

The process to redevelop the *Standards of Accreditation* leading to their approval by the membership at the 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting was a significant marker of the membership’s strong affirmation of the importance of educational quality and ongoing improvement. Throughout the process of redevelopment, the membership refused to compromise quality, while at the same time seeking greater flexibility to accommodate multiple educational modalities, experimentation, and innovation as needed to meet changing needs among constituencies.

Collegiality

A representative example of ATS collegiality is the close

collaboration and friendship that developed between two recent members of the Board of Commissioners. Though they could hardly have been more different as persons nor have come from schools that were less alike and more distant from each other on the ecclesial spectrum, the two became close friends. Their consistent support (and challenge!) of one another in the work of the Commission on behalf of member schools was a winsome affirmation of ATS collegiality.

Another illustration of the collegiality across ATS occurred in 2017, during the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. As part of an ATS project, a confessional Lutheran school collaborated with a Roman Catholic diocesan seminary to strengthen the former's work in the spiritual formation of students.

Leadership

Through ATS programs and initiatives and COA accreditation, leadership development and affirmation have remained important emphases. For more than a quarter century, ATS has offered a robust program of leadership development for administrators and faculty. This work remains a strategic priority. Programs and initiatives call on the expertise of leaders across the Association and affirm and support a wide range of leaders in their work. The *Standards of Accreditation* emphasize the importance of leadership and assist leaders to provide the wisdom and qualities needed by the schools.

The ATS core values have provided and continue to provide a strong foundation for the mission, vision, and strategic priorities of the membership.

¹ Closing Statement/Prayer of first Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in the United States and Canada, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 13–16, 1918. ATS archives.

² Presented at the 1958 Biennial Meeting in *Bulletin* 23, pp. 129–130.

³ Daniel O. Aleshire, "Looking Ahead: Report of the Executive Director," Agenda, ATS Executive Committee, June 7–8, 1999, p. 20.

⁴ In the documents related to discussions of the values to be named, both terms "core" and "key" are used interchangeably. See, for example, Plans of Work in Biennial Programs and Reports from 2008–20.

⁵ "Values Audit of ATS Board and Professional Staff, November 12, 2007," in *Board of Directors Agenda Book, November 29–30, 2007*, pp. 29–31.

⁶ Daniel O. Aleshire, "Summary of Conversations September 25 Conference Call" and letter of instruction, ATS archives.

⁷ There were 14 different responses for question #2 and 16 different responses for question #3. For questions 2 and 3 no response was mentioned more than twice by board members. Five ATS staff responded "benefiting broader publics in #2, and three ATS staff responded "foster culture of evaluation of student learning" in #3. No other particular staff responses were given by more than two people. See: "Values Audit of ATS Board and Professional Staff, November 12, 2007," *Board of Directors Agenda Book, November 29–30, 2007*, pp. 29–31.

⁸ Beginning in 2008, the "Plan for the Work of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada," updated and approved biannually by the ATS Board of Directors until 2020, this paragraph followed the statement of the four "key" values. See: *Ibid* and *Board of Directors Agenda Book, April 24–25, 2008*, pp. 47 ff. See also the plans of work for ATS in Biennial Meeting program books, printed from 2008–18 and digital format in 2020 and 2022. This statement is also included at the end of the Core Values page on the ATS website.

⁹ Purpose of the Conference, "8. To cultivate fellowship and the sense of a common purpose among theological teachers of different churches, which will doubtless have profound influence upon the closer relations of the churches themselves." *The Conference of Theological Seminaries of the United States and Canada, Bulletin* 2, December 1921, p. 4.

¹⁰ See: Standards of Accreditation, Standard 1.5.



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