

# ATS Standards of Accreditation, related resources can prove vital to *Pathways* grantees

BY VALERIE REMPEL

In a recent webinar sponsored by the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, the ATS Commission on Accrediting (COA) staff offered an introduction to accreditation for directors of projects funded by Lilly Endowment Inc.'s *Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative*.



(l-r) Matt Huffman, of the In Trust Center, and Christopher The and Jo Ann Deasy, of ATS, chat at a recent peer learning group gathering on sustainability for *Pathways for Tomorrow* grantees in Chicago.

The revision of the ATS Standards of Accreditation coincided with the launch of the *Pathways* Initiative in 2020. With an emphasis on educational principles over best practices, the revised *Standards* offer welcomed flexibility to schools seeking to launch innovative projects that fit their missions and contexts. Understanding these principles and the way they support the *Standards* is especially important when schools want to move in new directions.

The educational principles are not a one-to-one match with the *Standards* or a supplement to them. Rather, they serve as a foundation in the way they articulate the commitments and values of ATS member schools. They remind us, for example, that theological education prioritizes student learning and formation, and is most effective when it is contextually appropriate.

Quality theological education requires appropriate institutional resources and support, including sufficient and appropriate personnel, and it demonstrates careful institutional planning and evaluation. As the existing diversity within ATS membership suggests, these principles of

quality are met in different ways by different schools. The frequent use of the word “appropriate” is another indicator that context matters and varies from school to school.

While the principles set a foundation, it is the *Standards* themselves that should serve as the actual guide when developing or revising programs, as these are used by the COA Board of Commissioners in determining whether to approve a substantive change for something outside of a school's current accreditation scope. The *Standards* represent both legacy and innovation. Legacy, in the sense that they represent the accrued wisdom of the membership gained through the delivery of educational programs, and innovation in their emphasis on contextuality. This emphasis on contextuality is especially relevant for grant recipients (or any school!) as they design and launch new projects.

While schools and their *Pathways* projects are expected to align with the *Standards*, the emphasis on principles over best practices supports a wide range of outcomes

and welcomes innovation. At the same time, attention should be given to the role of the Board of Commissioners in approving or—in some cases—simply being informed of changes to existing curriculum or the launch of new initiatives. For example, changing a degree program’s curriculum by more than 25 percent is something the Board wants to know about and can usually be handled through submission of a notification form. On the other hand, launching a new degree program at a new educational level for the first time will require a petition to ensure that all the necessary resources are available for delivery. (Notification and petition forms are easily found under the “[Accreditation](#)” tab on the ATS website.)

Some schools are exploring non-traditional models of program delivery such as competency-based theological education. Depending on the model used, this may require permission from the Board for an educational experiment. There is no standard rubric to ensure approval, but careful attention to the ATS [Guidelines for Competency-Based Theological Education](#) will help schools develop strong petitions and quality programs. Other schools, especially those embedded in university settings, are developing accelerated programs that reduce the overall time to complete bachelor’s and master’s degrees. These schools will want to pay attention to the standards on educational policies and reduced-credit options (see especially Standard 3.13).

As grant projects and other programs are launched, schools will want to be mindful of their evaluation processes and what is being learned through program delivery. ATS Standard 2.6 describes evaluation as “a simple, systematic, and sustained process” that identifies desired outcomes, and gathers related evidence that is analyzed by the appropriate stakeholders to identify what might lead to educational and institutional improvement. This is necessary work to understand institutional and educational effectiveness, especially as it relates to achieving a school’s mission. When done well, it can also significantly contribute to a school’s strategic planning efforts. Planning and evaluation are related endeavors, as what is being learned through evaluation can inform planning for the future.

In addition to the *Standards of Accreditation*, ATS provides various resources for schools that are developing new projects or seeking to make other changes. These include:

- [Guidelines for Reduced-Credit Master’s Degrees](#) (especially helpful as schools develop accelerated programs)
- [Guidelines for Competency-Based Theological Education](#) (a critical resource for any school considering a CBTE delivery model)
- [Guidelines for Global Awareness and Engagement](#) (essential for any school delivering credit or non-credit programs outside of its national borders)
- [A Reflective Guide to Effective Evaluation for Theological Schools](#) (a useful resource for all levels of institutional or educational evaluation)
- [Notification forms](#) (needed for changing delivery, duration, or content of certain approved degrees, as well as other updates)
- [Petition forms](#) (needed for substantive changes as described in the ATS Commission [Policies and Procedures](#))
- [Self-Study Ideas](#) (prepared to assist schools in the self-study process, but useful for understanding the kinds of evidence that support alignment with the *Standards*)

A school’s individual membership page on the ATS [website](#) includes the name of its assigned ATS liaison—a primary resource when questions arise. In addition, the [ATS staff directory](#) provides specific contact information for each person in the accreditation department.



Valerie Rempel is Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.