

Commission on Accrediting membership approves revisions to *Standards of Accreditation*

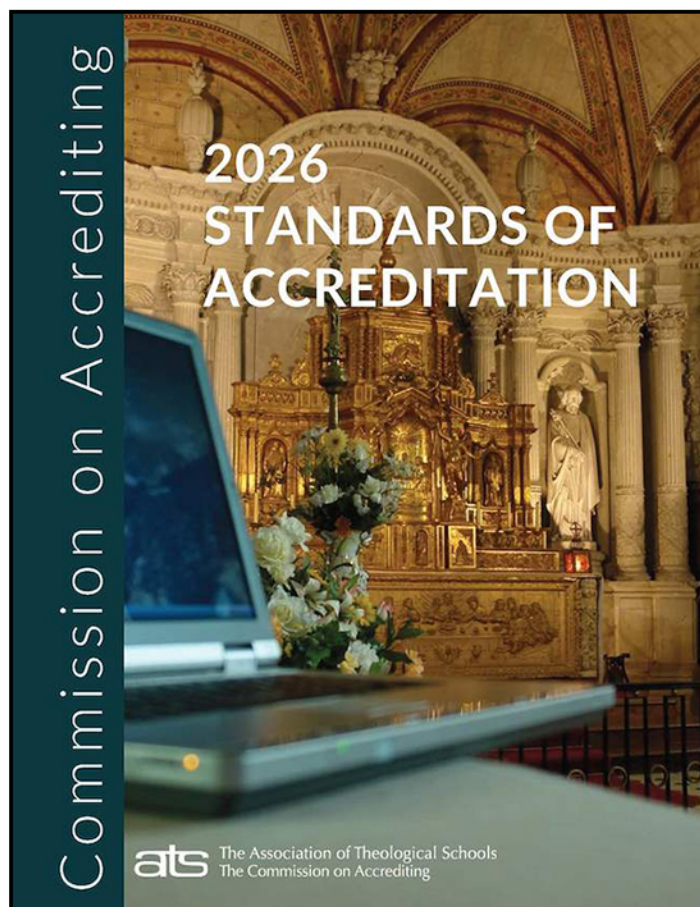
BY BARBARA MUTCH

With enthusiastic endorsement, the Commission on Accrediting (COA) membership approved revisions to the Standards of Accreditation and Policies and Procedures at the June 2026 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in Chicago. Building upon four years of member-wide experience with the 2020 redeveloped Standards, the Board of Commissioners in February 2024 authorized the periodic review required by the Commission Policy on Board Responsibility. The time seemed right to review the Standards, which in so many ways hold together the “long pew” of Commission-accredited schools.

Since spring 2024, more than 600 individuals have examined the *Standards and Policies* through surveys, in-person engagement during the 2024 Biennial Meeting, and submission of comments invited on three separate occasions throughout the process. The membership was kept up to date with the process through well-attended webinars ([June 2025](#) and [March 2026](#)) and articles in *Colloquy* in [February](#) and [October 2025](#).

Strong affirmation was received for the ability of the 2020 *Standards* to:

- Promote the improvement and enhancement of theological education.
- Recognize and respect member schools’ missions and theological commitments.
- Be sufficiently flexible to allow schools to respond creatively in pursuit of educational missions.
- And help keep schools focused on key principles such as mission and student outcomes.



At the same time, it was clear that much had changed in the educational and technological landscapes since the preparatory work of redeveloping the *Standards of Accreditation* began in 2016:

- Interest in competency-based theological education has grown.
- Generative artificial intelligence and digital learning have brought multiple questions to seemingly every aspect of education and institutional life.
- And an increasing number of schools have been pursuing relationships of various models with universities and other bodies, raising attendant questions related to shared governance and resources.

In addition, residential instruction in the PhD program and growth in awareness of the global nature of theological education were identified by the membership as areas for ongoing attention. And spring 2025 witnessed the issuing of several US federal executive orders regarding diversity in higher education, which required legal counsel and careful attention.

The re-recognition of the Commission on Accrediting by the US Department of Education in spring 2026 identified a few additional necessary amendments.

The combined revisions to the Standards of Accreditation, Commission Policies and Procedures, and Commission Bylaws, stemming from membership input and the above-mentioned circumstances, were presented to the membership prior to the June Biennial Meeting and approved on June 24. Changes became effective on July 1, 2026.

The Self-Study Ideas that provide suggestions for how schools might demonstrate their alignment with the Standards were expanded in response to the changing landscape and approved by the Board of Commissioners in June. They, too, went into effect July 1.

Peer reviewer resources for servicing schools in the initial accreditation, reaffirmation or focus visit processes are also being updated, as is the ALO/CAO Orientation Canvas site.

Member schools scheduled for a comprehensive accreditation reaffirmation visit beginning in September 2028 will evaluate themselves and be evaluated according to the 2026 Standards. Schools preparing for initial accreditation visits in 2027 or later are encouraged to work with the 2026 Standards. All schools scheduled for accreditation visits prior to fall 2028 may choose between the 2020 and the revised 2026 Standards and should inform their staff liaison of their choice.

New educational opportunities in support of schools are also being developed in areas identified throughout the Standards review process and will begin availability in fall 2026.

Written comments received from the membership included:

- “The suggested revisions seem appropriate and helpful.”
- “These all sound reasonable, given the current realities.”
- “I think changes to some of the phrasing on diversity were very helpful. Diversity remains a core element needing attention within member schools (as it should), but the revisions seem to more clearly anchor this task within each school’s mission and tradition.”

The Board-appointed working committee for the Standards review is deeply grateful for the enthusiastic membership engagement throughout the review process.



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