

# Governance and Administration: reviewing ATS Standard 9

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*“Theological schools are communities of faith and learning governed by those with authority to ensure schools meet their missions with educational quality and financial sustainability” (Standard 9, opening paragraph).*

## **Where do you fit in the governance of a school?**

Perhaps surprisingly for those unfamiliar with the *Standards of Accreditation*,

Standard 9: Governance and Administration is about more than just a school’s board members and senior leaders. Rather, from its opening paragraph, the standard makes clear that effective **“governance is based on a bond of trust** among boards, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and ecclesial or denominational bodies where shared governance is clearly defined and appropriately implemented” (Standard 9, opening paragraph).

## **The sections of Standard 9 outline the following:**

- Governance Authority and Qualifications
- Governance Responsibilities and Processes
- Shared Governance
- Administration

**Governing bodies play a central role.** While governance that serves a school well engages each of its most significant constituents, Standard 9 outlines considerations for the governing body of a school more so than any other group. Governing bodies bear a variety of names and come in many shapes and sizes, but all work to ensure that a school’s “mission is achieved in ways that demonstrate educational quality, and financial sustainability” (Standard



9.1). This may be a dedicated governing body (or in the case of “a school embedded in another entity...some group that attends to the theological school’s mission, such as a board committee or an advisory council, and documents that group’s authority and responsibilities”).

**Qualifications matter.** A “school’s governing members possess the qualifications appropriate to their fiduciary responsibilities and represent the diversity reflected in the school’s mission, ecclesial or denominational commitments, and constituencies” (Standard 9.2). The governing body acts collectively as a group and ensures members are duly appointed and adequately oriented. Boards benefit from individuals with diverse experiences. This includes church, ministry, theological education, higher education, business, and nonprofit experience. Recruiting qualified and diverse board members can strengthen both a board’s work and its connections with stakeholders.

**The work of governance need not be a mystery.** Schools have “clear and current documents that describe its governing body’s authority, responsibilities, composition, and governance processes.” Chief among its responsibilities are fiscal responsibility and ensuring that a school’s mis-

sion is met (Standard 9.3). Effective governance requires a bond of trust. This trust is built on engagement with a school's various constituents, clear understandings of roles and responsibilities, good communication, and regular evaluation. Trust must be built and sustained through consistent action, good communication, and the intentional nurturing of relationships. "The governing body communicates its major decisions in clear and timely ways to all appropriate constituencies" (Standard 9.4). Seeking ongoing "improvement and enhancement," governing bodies regularly evaluate their "responsibilities, processes, and actions and use those results to improve its effectiveness" (Standard 9.5).

#### **Governing bodies seek input and delegate authority.**

"Governing bodies understand that their decisions are enhanced by seeking the wisdom of the community in collaborative ways." (Standard 9.6) Governing bodies delegate to the administration the management of "the school's resources and operations within any appropriate guidelines" (Standard 9.7). To the faculty, the governing body delegates "appropriate authority to oversee the school's academic programs and policies in light of their expertise in those areas" and "an appropriate role" in admissions, recommending candidates for graduation, and the "appoint-

-ing, retaining, and promoting of faculty" (Standard 9.8). Acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating the distinct roles of each part of an institution helps build trust.

Standard 8 deals in detail with the responsibilities, composition, qualifications, and support for faculty. Standard 9 closes by addressing the administration and asserts that schools have an "administrative structure adequate to the size and nature of the school and sufficiently staffed to achieve the school's mission." That structure includes "persons who fill the roles of chief executive officer, chief academic officer, and chief financial officer" (Standard 9.9).

**Though the work of a board's governing body sits at the core of Standard 9, that work is not possible without involvement with the school's many constituents.** Just as members of a school's governing body are encouraged to be explicit and intentional about engaging administrators, faculty, staff, students, and ecclesial or denominational bodies, members of those constituent groups are encouraged to ask about, seek to understand, and participate in the various ways they are called to work with the governing body in pursuit of a school's mission. Ongoing, shared, transparent, reflective interaction among a school's many constituents builds trust as members of the community steward, administer, execute, and benefit from that collective work.



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