

Quality, flexibility, and COVID-19: three reflections

BY SARAH DRUMMOND

Between serving on the ATS steering committee for the Educational Models Project, the pre-planning task force for the ATS Standards Redevelopment, and the Standards and Policies Redevelopment Task Force, I have spent the past six years thinking about how accreditation can adapt to, and even encourage, innovation.



As the redevelopment process nears its conclusion, we have hit a terrible interruption in the form of COVID-19. One not familiar with where we are in the process might assume that I am disappointed and concerned for the timing of this pandemic and the disruption it might cause our redevelopment process. I am disappointed and concerned about a lot of things related to COVID-19, but as for the timing of the redevelopment process, I am feeling lucky—in the way one feels lucky when they have threaded a needle or dodged a blow.

First, I feel lucky because the in-person dimensions of redevelopment—namely the regional gatherings where the task force gathered wisdom from the membership—had just come to an end when travel became a problem. All the remaining work was meant to take place at a distance or was easy to adapt along those lines. COVID-19 did not interfere in any way with the data- and feedback-gathering processes that were essential to ensuring that the new *Standards and Policies* are both *for* the members and *from* the members.

Secondly, I feel lucky that we had already begun to identify within our task force the need for extensive education on the redeveloped standards on the other side of their affirmation by the membership. We were and are viewing June's vote as crucial, but it was no longer serving as the end point in our minds. Completion of the redevelopment of the *Standards and Policies*, when it happens, will have a long tail.

Thirdly, I think we are all lucky to have been reminded by recent events how important flexibility is to our schools, and how quality and flexibility can walk hand-in-hand. The newly-drafted *Standards* focus more on principles than practice. If there were ever a time when principles of quality needed to hold steady, while changing virtually every practice undergirding them, it is now.

The ATS *Standards and Policies* Redevelopment Task Force had to change its methodology in important ways, fairly quickly. But no corner was cut; no due diligence foregone. Quality and flexibility are not mutually

exclusive. On the contrary, these times call upon us to be flexible in order that quality might even be possible. This learning late in the game has served as an important reminder to the task force of why it is that we

need standards that facilitate change—sometimes rapid change—without losing track of the purpose of change, which is to teach our students better, far into the future.



Sarah B. Drummond is Founding Dean at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. She chairs the task force redeveloping the ATS Commission Standards and Policies.