

# Seeking elegant simplicity with humility and humanity: an update on redeveloping the Standards and Procedures

By SARAH DRUMMOND

The Chronicle of Higher Education's cover story in its May 10, 2019 issue profiles activist Lloyd Thacker. Thacker founded The Education Conservancy in 2004 and then closed the college admissions think-tank earlier this year. He has come out of retirement by popular demand in the aftermath of the biggest scandal in the history of US college admissions, where law enforcement agencies exposed widespread corruption in college placement in the forms of bribery and influence-peddling.

The article in *The Chronicle* features a one-page manifesto from The Education Conservancy that lays out principles of good admissions practices: "Education is a process, not a product. Students are learners, not customers. The benefits and predictors of good education are knowable yet virtually impossible to measure. Rankings oversimplify and mislead . . . Colleges can be assessed, but not ranked. Students can be evaluated, but not measured."

As I read what seemed to me a bill of rights for college applicants, *I thought with both pride and humility about the process through which the Redevelopment Task Force has approached this "year of listening."* On one hand, we entered this year knowing that our redeveloped standards need to be clearer and shorter. On the other hand,



we are focused on a corner of higher education that has become dramatically more complicated since the last redevelopment of the ATS Standards and Procedures.

*I feel like the task force, so far, has been able to come up with ideas for fostering excellence through "elegant simplicity" without oversimplifying the task unto which our schools have been called.* In harmony with The Education Conservancy, we are stressing the importance of assessment and evaluation over ranking and measuring. We are providing many and varied ways for schools to tell their stories about how their practices further their missions, and how they are carrying out those practices faithfully.

Our task force is now turning its attention from gathering and analyzing input from an array of stakeholders to reflecting on what has been learned. We are structuring our work together so that we cannot leap from data to action without that important intermediate step—thinking and talking together about what we have learned.

The task force has met nearly a dozen times this past year, has engaged more than 700 ATS participants in more than 50 focus groups, and has appointed a dozen working groups. We now have nearly 250 pages of

membership input upon which to reflect. It has been a busy and full year for our task force.

In the busyness, however, I believe we have held fast to the human dimensions of accreditation. We are focused on institutions, of course, but those institutions are made up of people who are different from one another, who

are trying their best to live out a calling, and who deserve quality in their educational endeavors. By placing collaborative inquiry at the center of all our task force's activities, *we hope the humanity of the schools we serve simply could not get lost on us.*



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