

# Six words tell a story about new principle-based ATS Standards

By TOM TANNER

The story goes that someone once bet Ernest Hemingway \$10 that he could not write a short story using only six words. He took that bet and said it was the best story he'd ever written. His six-word story? "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." You can tell quite a story with only six words. Six words can also tell us quite a story about the new principle-based Standards of Accreditation. Those six words are found in the accreditation section on the ATS website in three two-word phrases: educational quality, accreditation clarity, and contextualized flexibility. Before examining them, let's begin with a question that explores and explains the very different approach these new Standards take.

## What does "principle-based" mean?

The most distinctive feature of the new Standards is that they are "principle-based." What does it mean for a set of accrediting standards to be "principle-based"? Historically, most standards have been "practice-based." Since their inception in 1936, the ATS Standards of Accreditation have basically been based on "best practices." That doesn't mean there weren't quality educational principles underlying those, but the Standards themselves were almost always described as embodying and enunciating "best practices." The challenge with that approach is that as ATS member schools became more numerous and more diverse, the ATS Standards became increasingly more voluminous and more detailed—attempting to keep up with so many emerging and differing practices.



What began as a one-page (!) set of 10 standards evolved over the next 80-plus years to three sets of 28 standards filling more than 100 pages—the largest by far of any accrediting agency! By contrast, the new principle-based Standards constitute only one set of Standards in only 18 pages. Brevity itself is no virtue, but neither is verbosity. So, what is the "virtue" of principle-based standards? Let me suggest four responses.

**1** Principle-based standards rightly focus on quality educational principles more than on individual institutional practices. To be sure, every accrediting standard—even "best-practice" ones—ought to be based on some underlying educational principle. What the new Standards do is put those principles on center stage. For example, Standard 9 on governance states a key principle right up front: "governance is based on a bond of trust." Without that focusing principle, no set of governing practices will truly be effective. Focusing on principles not only permits but also encourages the increasingly diverse and distinct sets of practices emerging in theological education—without having to write new standards for every new practice. It puts the

emphasis where it belongs—on the educational principle, not the institutional practice.

**2** *Principle-based standards still recognize the importance of practices because practices demonstrate how schools live out principles.* One is reminded of James 2:18: “Show me your faith [principles] without deeds [practices], and I will show you my faith [principles] by my deeds [practices].” “Principle-based” does not mean practice-free. Standard 8.9, for example, requires schools to support faculty scholarship with “clear and consistent policies and practices.” Principles cannot be effective until they are put into practice.

**3** *Principle-based standards mean schools must be prepared to explain the practices they choose.* One example of how a principle-based approach differs from a practice-based approach addresses the issue of admitting students without baccalaureate degrees. Past standards typically set an arbitrary limit as a “best practice,” such as 15 percent. That numeric limit often meant schools focused more on counting students than on weighing their capacities to learn. The new Standard 7.4 allows schools to admit an unlimited number of such students “if the school demonstrates through rigorous means that those students are prepared to do graduate-level work.” The focus is on rigorous means rather than raw math. In that regard, principle-based standards can be harder to implement than those based on best practices.

Schools must be able to make the case—if needed—of why their practices are most effective for implementing these principles, as there is no longer simply a list of practices to follow or numbers to count. The need to explain practices is a reminder that principle-based standards are not practice-neutral. Ends and means both matter. One is reminded, ironically, of Augustine’s famous line: “Love God and do what you will.” That’s not an invitation to

anarchy. It’s a reminder that if one truly loves God, one will do as He wills. Similarly, principle-based standards are not a license for a school to do anything it wants, but to think carefully and thoughtfully about how the practices it chooses best help that school achieve its mission and meet these *Standards*.

**4** *Principle-based standards enable more mission-minded creativity.* “Practice-based” standards tend to limit schools to fixed sets of practices, which can become quickly dated, overly limiting, and unintentionally insensitive to each school’s distinctive mission and context. Principle-based standards do not focus on fixed practices—about the only thing they privilege is each school’s mission, with the word “mission” occurring nearly 40 times in the *Standards*. Standard 3.6 illus-

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trates well this focus on mission-minded creativity, requiring that every school “demonstrates sound pedagogy in student learning and formation, utilizing effective instructional designs and

employing educational modalities that are appropriate to its mission and capacities...” [and two other criteria]. That one principle replaces more than 40 specific practices on educational delivery methods articulated in the previous *Standards*, many of which the membership found too confusing or too confining. Standard 3.6 encourages schools to explore whatever pedagogical practices best meet their missions—in light of the principles stated. The new *Standards* invite innovation (see, for example, Standard 3.10 on experiments), something that has proven particularly timely amid a pandemic. As one school wrote in a recent report on planning, “changes in the ATS standards for accreditation open new opportunities for [us] to explore innovation.”

With that principle-based overview, here are six words that “tell the story of” the new *Standards of Accreditation*: *educational quality, accreditation clarity, and contextualized flexibility.*

## Words one and two: educational quality

The first two words of this six-word story are “educational quality.” When the new *Standards* were being developed, the membership listed as its highest concern that any new standards focus first and foremost on educational quality. What good are large libraries or extensive endowments or first-rate facilities if students are not getting a quality education? Standards can never be effective if they do not lead to effective education.

Central to the 10 new *Standards* is Standard 3 on Student Learning and Formation because student learning and formation is at the heart of these principle-based *Standards*. To quote the opening paragraph to that standard:

Theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation. Consistent with their missions and religious identities, theological schools give appropriate attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation. Schools pursue those dimensions with attention to academic rigor, intercultural competency, global awareness and engagement, and lifelong learning.

If schools (and peer reviewers) do not get that standard right, nothing else much matters. Schools may meet every other standard, but if they miss Standard 3, they miss not only the point but the heart of the entire enterprise. Educational quality matters.

## Words three and four: accreditation clarity

The next two words of this six-word story address a concern that the membership expressed throughout the redevelopment of the new *Standards*—a desire for a simpler, clearer set of standards. The desire for “accreditation clarity” is one reason why these *Standards* use simple indicative verbs (e.g., Standard 3.2 “The school demonstrates academic rigor...”), rather than the “shall” and “should” statements of the previous *Standards*, which schools often found confusing. The new *Standards* state what quality schools actually do, not what they might possibly aspire to do. The membership’s desire for clarity is also why the new *Standards* are briefer (18 pages vs. 100-plus pages) and why there is only one set of 10, rather than three sets of 28 standards.

To be sure, brevity can sometimes create ambiguity, which is why the ATS Board of Commissioners also issued an “amplified” set of *Standards*, called *Standards of Accreditation with Self-Study Ideas*. Those “ideas” provide schools with numerous examples for every standard of how they might demonstrate that they meet that standard and how they might put into practice that principle. Those “ideas” are not a secondary set of standards; they are simply suggestions for schools wanting to explore various ways in which they might engage the new principle-based *Standards*.

## Words five and six: contextualized flexibility

The last two words of this six-word story may be one of the lasting legacies of these new *Standards*: “contextualized flexibility.” Previous sets of standards tended to take a “one size fits all approach.” That made sense when the vast majority of ATS schools were strikingly similar—free-standing schools preparing primarily white male students through campus-based MDiv programs for pastoral positions in mainline Protestant congregations. That “one size” has not fit most ATS members for decades, but previous standards still tended to treat anything outside that “one size” as “other.” As different “sizes” emerged in the membership, the *Standards* worked hard to accommodate the “other,” whether by adding standards on “persons of color,” prescriptive statements on “distance education,” or new “professional degree” standards (standards for professional MA degrees did not appear until 1972).

By contrast, the new *Standards* do not presume any ATS school structure, ecclesial family, educational pedagogy, or student demographic to be “the norm.” In fact, two of the most frequent words in the new *Standards* are “appropriate” (more than 80 times) and “context” (nearly 30 times). For example, Standard 1.1 requires each school’s mission to be “appropriate to the purposes and values of graduate theological education and to its own context and constituencies.” One size does not fit all contexts. One of the most compelling examples of “contextualized flexibility” may be found in Standard 1.5 on diversity:

The school acts with integrity by valuing, defining, and demonstrating diversity within the context of its mission, history, constituency, and theological commitments. The school has a publicly available stance on diversity that describes its understanding of and commitment to this membership-wide shared value, and the school uses that stance to enhance its diversity.

The “Self-Study Ideas” for this standard on diversity is the longest of all the “ideas,” providing multiple examples of how schools can demonstrate adherence. Put differently, this standard on diversity recognizes the reality that our schools are, themselves, incredibly diverse and approach this issue from very different perspectives. It’s also the only standard that references a “membership-wide shared value”—while each school has the flexibility to choose how to best demonstrate diversity in its own context, all schools must still do so in ways that show “commitment to this membership-wide shared value.” One size does not fit all; however, everyone must wear something that fits—not only that school but also the values we hold in common as a community of theological schools.

### ***A final word***

One of my favorite words is “future.” That word describes well a key focus of these new principle-based *Standards*

*of Accreditation* because accreditation is essentially forward-looking. And these *Standards* are ones that should last well into the future, while fostering hope about that future. The kind of future these *Standards* envision is illustrated poignantly by a comment heard during the final stages of the redevelopment process in spring 2020. The last of six cities the redevelopment task force visited to garner feedback from ATS members on the new *Standards* was Seattle. That city was just emerging at the time as ground zero for a pandemic that has created so much uncertainty and anxiety about the future. This is the comment from an ATS dean at that meeting in Seattle: “These new *Standards* are focused not on a fearful future but a preferred future. They speak to what is best about theological education.”

Maybe those last six words are the best six words to tell the story about these principle-based *Standards*: they speak to “what is best about theological education.”



Tom Tanner is Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.