

# ATS Standards of Accreditation: serving the ATS membership for 80 years

By STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

*"At its February [2017] meeting, the ATS Board of Commissioners authorized a sub-committee to design a Standards redevelopment process for the membership to consider at the 2018 Centennial Biennial Meeting."<sup>1</sup> According to the chair of the Board of Commissioners, Harry Gardner, "We on the Board of Commissioners view our role as that of 'the stewards of the Standards.' Our job as this process develops is to ensure that all voices share in an intentional, committed, consultative, and iterative process."<sup>2</sup> ATS Executive Director Daniel O. Aleshire noted that regardless of the specific nature of the process, "the work will be the work of the schools." He concluded, "The redeveloped Standards will provide both a bridge and a passageway to the future of accredited theological education."<sup>3</sup>*

From its beginning, members have chosen to join the Association as a means to support the high value they place on the theological education of religious leaders. They have known that shared understandings of quality, and later the formal processes of accreditation, support their self-reflection and efforts to improve to fulfill their distinctive missions. Through accreditation, each school's quality and integrity is assured for constituencies and the broader public.

Redeveloping the *Standards of Accreditation* reveals the high value and importance of accrediting for member schools of The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting. The process highlights the distinctive character of ATS



accreditation and demonstrates the harmony of ATS accrediting with the organization's core values: diversity, quality and improvement, collegiality, and leadership.

## **A brief look back**

In 1918, 101 delegates representing 49 theological schools met in conference and decided to establish their relationship in a formal organization. At the close of this first "Conference of Theological Schools," a delegate prayed in gratitude to God for "gathering this unique, and it may be historic Conference." He continued by expressing the hope that the conference "may grow in strength, become a permanent institution, and contribute beyond our present measure to the equipment of the ministry of the gospel and the uniting in one holy service of the separate positions of the Church of Christ."<sup>4</sup> These statements and actions foreshadowed what were later identified as ATS core values: leadership to facilitate quality and improvement; and collegiality across present and expanding diversities.

In 1936, the ATS Constitution formally established the Commission on Accrediting. Over time, the Commission has frequently revised and updated the *Standards of Accreditation*, but on only three occasions have the

Standards been redeveloped and approved by the membership...in 1972, 1996, and 2020.<sup>5</sup> These comprehensive multi-year projects have responded to changes in higher education, the schools, the church, and the societies in which the schools exist and serve.

The 1936 Standards comprised a single page with nine topics: admission, length of the Bachelor of Divinity degree, curriculum, faculty, library, equipment, finances, general tone, and inspection.<sup>6</sup>

## **1972 – opening doors**

Over the years, the Standards have expanded in response to changes in theological education and circumstances not explicitly covered by previous versions, reaching 14 Standards and 16 pages in length by 1970.<sup>7</sup> The first major redevelopment, in 1972, resulted in 18 Standards, comprised of nine General Institutional Standards and nine Degree Program Standards, covering 32 pages. The 1972 Standards sought to “open doors” for students by initiating more flexible admission requirements for older students and pathways for persons previously deprived through “racial or ethnic discrimination of the educational achievement expected by the Standards.”<sup>8</sup>

The 1972 Standards also opened wider the doors of membership for schools across ecclesial families and religious boundaries, including Roman Catholic schools, Evangelical Protestant schools, and a Jewish school.

A ten-member Committee on Revision was formed in 1970. Nine task forces including 75 to 100 people produced preliminary drafts of the 1972 Standards. ATS Executive Director Jesse Ziegler named three goals for the Standards: “to provide for flexibility and innovation”; to maintain “rigor and evaluation of quality of education”; and “protection of the credibility of the theological education enterprise with its publics at a time of great flux and ferment.”<sup>9</sup>

## **1996 – What is the good theological school?**

The key question for the 1996 redevelopment was, “*What is the good theological school?*”

This four-year project doubled the length of the Standards

and included four key themes: globalization, inclusion, freedom of inquiry, and planning and evaluation of outcomes.

Other issues included increasing pluralism, globalization, minority and women’s concerns, educational delivery models, and “a new definition of theological education that focused on the ‘reflective practitioner.’”<sup>10</sup>

Led by a 13-person steering committee, the redevelopment process also employed four task forces, processed three drafts, engaged two Biennial Meetings, and hosted eight regional meetings with 221 participants representing 60 percent of the member schools.<sup>11</sup>

The 1996 report from the ATS executive director noted that “generations of leaders of this Association” have been committed to “the improvement of theological education.” This “most comprehensive assessment of Standards in the history of ATS” is “a reaffirmation of that commitment.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Revision – 2010 and 2012**

A four-year revision process (2008–2012) produced a three-part set of Standards that followed previous trends in revision, expanding their length, in this case to almost 30,000 words, representing a nearly 50 percent increase over the 1996 Standards.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-2010s, however, a tipping point had been reached. The Standards were comprehensive, but increasingly arduous to use. Between 2013 and 2020, the Board of Commissioners had approved 242 petitions for exceptions and experiments, 227 for exceptions and 15 for educational experiments. As innovation continued, how many more specific practices could be added without the Standards becoming unusable? With so many exceptions approved, did the Standards continue to serve as a norm?

The Standards were due for another comprehensive redevelopment.

As with previous redevelopments and some revisions, the initial step was research. With generous funding from

Lilly Endowment Inc., the Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project was launched at the 2014 Biennial Meeting.

Fundamental to the project was learning from the schools. Research projects were designed to map what the schools were doing and to collect their wisdom about how best to serve their constituencies.

The project awarded more than 100 small grants to schools in two categories—innovation and faculty development—with reports from each school on its activities and learning.<sup>14</sup>

The EMP also studied ATS alumni in the religious workforce, asking a range of questions about where ATS school graduates were serving, what they were doing, what credentials were required for their positions, and what aspects of their learning and formation from theological education they utilized in their work.

The project convened leaders from graduate schools of social work, education, law, medicine, business, and general humanities to discuss common challenges and opportunities.

Together these sources of information provided the most comprehensive view yet of member schools as a foundation upon which to build the redevelopment process.

## ***2020 – What is good theological education?***

In 2017, the Board of Commissioners appointed a preparatory committee to develop a plan for a possible comprehensive redevelopment of the Standards. The plan was approved in principle by the Board of Commissioners in February 2018 and approved by the membership at the 2018 Biennial Meeting. An aggressive two-year timeline was affirmed.<sup>15</sup> The Board of Commissioners had also appointed a 19-member redevelopment task force, ready to hit the ground running. The task force included 13 people representing member schools from the three ecclesial families with remarkable diversity within each family, five from Mainline Protestant schools, five from Evangelical Protestant Schools, and three from Roman Catholic schools. The task force was also broadly representative of the membership with eight women and

nine persons of color. A key theme of the redevelopment was “what is good theological education,” a logical step from the growing emphasis on learning outcomes with a focus more on student learning and formation than on the schools themselves.

Key emphases and goals for the process included:

- Three key words: quality, simplicity, and flexibility.<sup>16</sup>
- Emphasis on principles rather than practices.
- Attention to and support of the unique mission of each school.
- Concise, more flexible Standards to accommodate each school’s context, while maintaining quality assurance.
- Openness to innovation while affirming the accrued wisdom of the schools.
- Thoughtful attention to the contextual realities faced by the schools.

## ***The year of listening***

Immediately following the Biennial Meeting in June, the task force began the 2018–2019 academic year as the year of “researching and listening.” In addition to previous input from the Educational Models and Practices project, conversations at leadership education events, the ongoing work of the Board of Commissioners, and member comments, the task force engaged more than 600 ATS participants from nearly 200 member schools through 50 focus groups and a dozen working groups,<sup>17</sup> and received more than 1,100 member email comments.

Prior to the drafting of the *Standards and Policies*<sup>18</sup> themselves, the task force worked to clarify philosophy through two documents, one serving as a statement of “Key Principles” and the other a Preamble to the Standards.

## ***The year of writing***

Membership input led the task force to create a shorter, principle-based version of the Standards, marked by “elegant simplicity.” The initial draft proposed one set of ten Standards to replace the current three sets of 19 Standards, with 8,000 words rather than the current version’s 30,000 words. The task force decided to craft



“self-study ideas” that were clearly distinguished from the Standards, but shared ideas about how schools *might* document fulfillment of particular Standards.

The Board of Commissioners distributed two drafts to the membership, and the task force incorporated dozens of revisions. Comments and input were gathered from six in-person regional meetings and two webinars, and the task force prepared a final draft.<sup>19</sup>

Immediately after the last regional meeting in March 2020, the pandemic hit.

Pandemic restrictions made the in-person Biennial Meeting scheduled for that summer impossible, and the task force, ATS staff, and the membership shifted to the Association’s first and only fully online Biennial Meeting. While the methodology of final conversations and vote had to be changed, the chair of the redevelopment task force insisted that “no corner was cut; nor due diligence foregone.”<sup>20</sup>

ATS staff quickly pivoted to prepare a new website to help members prepare for the meeting, including an in-depth exploration of the proposed new *Standards and Policies*. This portion of the website included sections on the redevelopment process, key changes, drafts of documents to be voted on, information about implementation should the documents be approved, and frequently asked questions.<sup>21</sup>

Two hundred member schools registered as voting members for the 2020 Biennial Meeting. Despite extensive time allowed for discussion, no amendments were suggested, and the redeveloped *Standards and Policies* were approved by a vote of 198 to one.

### ***The year of educating and implementing***

Following the approval of the redeveloped *Standards and Policies*, the Board of Commissioners implemented a year of education and implementation that included a number of events and a variety of resources designed to help schools better understand and live into the new Standards. Existing resources were revised, and accrediting materials on the ATS website, such as petition and notification forms, were updated.

### ***Five-year review***

Now that the redeveloped *Standards and Policies* have been in use for five years, a review of the documents and processes is underway to ensure that they are serving the membership as effectively as possible. The Board of Commissioners appointed a working committee at its February 2024 meeting. Committee activity includes gathering input from the 2024 Biennial Meeting, a survey of all peer reviewers who have served on evaluation committees since fall 2020, and a public call for comments. Most recently, the working committee hosted a webinar to present an initial draft of revisions affirmed by the Board of Commissioners at their June 2025 meeting. At this point, it appears that no changes will be recommended for the Policies of the Commission on Accrediting, and only a few minor revisions have been recommended for the Standards. Additional membership input will contribute to an authorized draft to be made public in spring 2026, leading to a membership vote on proposed revisions at the 2026 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting.

### ***Results and reflections***

There is strong consensus among member schools that the 2020 Standards are serving their needs effectively and that the re-accreditation process is much simplified compared to previous versions. Self-study reports are considerably shorter, and schools have found that the principle-based Standards allow necessary contextualization for each school’s distinctive mission. The redeveloped Standards strongly reflect and affirm the Association’s core values.

Virtually all who have used them have found that these Standards require interpretation by the Board of Commissioners, members of evaluation committees, the schools, and ATS Commission staff. The self-study ideas are helpful, and schools regularly receive counsel and support from their ATS accrediting liaisons, but the variety of schools and contexts require ongoing thinking about application. That process of discernment will continue and will reinforce the collegial and aspirational character of The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting.



<sup>1</sup> Daniel O. Aleshire, "Board of Commissioners launches planning effort for next development of Standards and Procedures," *Colloquy*, February 2017, p. 1-3. This article was the first in a series of 31 articles published in *Colloquy* to keep the membership informed through the vote to approve the *Standards of Accreditation and Policies and Procedures* at the 2020 Biennial Meeting. See Addendum for links to pertinent articles in that series.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> "Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in the United States and Canada, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., August 13 to 16, 1918," p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> In 1918 a group of schools formed the Conference of Theological Seminaries and Colleges in the United States and Canada. The organization was later known as the American Association of Theological Schools and finally as The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. The Association began work toward becoming an accreditation body in 1934, and in 1938, published its first list of 46 accredited schools. See: Thomas M. Tanner, *Taking the Longer View: A History of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (1934-2021)*, Appendix C., p. 119. The ATS Constitution formally established the Commission on Accrediting in 1936, Tanner, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Tanner, Appendix B. Original ATS Standards from 1936.

<sup>7</sup> While there were significant revisions of the Standards in both 1956 and 1984, the pattern of ongoing modification of the Standards had been the norm. From 1950 to 2012, only in two Biennial Meetings (1964 and 1988) were no new or revised Standards approved by the membership. Tanner, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Tanner, endnote 144.

<sup>9</sup> Bulletin 30, 1972, part 6, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Tanner, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> The 13 members of the steering committee included nine from Mainline Protestant schools, three from Evangelical Protestant schools, and one from a Roman Catholic school (Katarina Schuth, who chaired the committee). Tanner, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Bulletin 42, 1996, Part 6, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Tanner, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Schools responding to the surveys, peer group participants, and grant recipient schools were widely representative of the diversities across ATS: ecclesial families, US and Canada, sizes of schools, participation by racial/ethnic persons, and embedded and freestanding schools.

<sup>15</sup> A very significant time saver was the availability of digital communication, allowing constant input, instant sharing of drafts with the membership, and rapid response from the membership.

<sup>16</sup> Tanner, "Reflections on redevelopment," *Colloquy*, June 2018, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> For details on the 50 focus groups and 12 working groups see: Tanner, "A year of listening to ATS members: update on redeveloping Standards and Procedures," *Colloquy*, April 2019, p. 1, and Tanner, "Once-in-a-generation motion to occur at ATS Biennial Meeting," *Colloquy*, May 2020, pp. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> The Commission Policies are member-approved rules that govern Board actions and processes. Board Procedures were distinguished from the Board's Policies with the 2020 revision. The procedures are approved by the Board but not by the membership.

<sup>19</sup> As one participant at a regional meeting put it, "The new Standards are focused not on a fearful future but on a preferred future. They speak to what is best about theological education."

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Drummond, "Quality, flexibility, and COVID-19: three reflections," *Colloquy*, April 2020, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See: Debbie Creamer, "Online resources for Biennial Meeting and redevelopment of Standards now available," *Colloquy*, May 2020.



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**See the next page for a full list of links to  
Colloquy articles related to the 2020 redevelopment.**

**Addendum:**  
**Colloquy articles related to the 2020 Redevelopment**

***Preparation to redevelop***

- Board of Commissioners launches planning effort for next redevelopment of Standards and Procedures (February 2017)
- Ten things for consideration in the next accrediting standards: learnings from the Educational Models and Practices project (June 2017)
- Membership to vote on authorization of redevelopment of ATS Commission Standards and Procedures (March 2018)
- Five reasons for a comprehensive redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures (April 2018)
- Key questions and concerns regarding the proposed redevelopment of ATS Commission Standards and Procedures (April 2018)
- ATS Board of Commissioners names redevelopment task force (May 2018)

***Process of redevelopment***

- Membership unanimously approves motion to redevelop ATS Commission Standards and Procedures (June 2018)
- Reflections on redevelopment (June 2018)
- We're listening: an update on redeveloping ATS Commission Standards and Procedures (October 2018)
- Six months and counting: an update on redeveloping the Standards and Procedures (Holiday 2018)
- Progress in the process: update on redeveloping the ATS standards and procedures (February 2019)
- Standards redevelopment reflections: including students in discernment (March 2019)
- A year of listening to ATS members: update on redeveloping Standards and Procedures (April 2019)
- Seeking elegant simplicity with humility and humanity: an update on redeveloping the Standards and Procedures (May 2019)
- The "year of listening"—what did the Standards and Procedures Redevelopment Task Force learn? (Summer 2019)
- The complexity of simplicity: an update on redeveloping the standards (Summer 2019)
- Redevelopment Task Force coming this spring to a city near you (September 2019)
- Getting closer—update on first public draft of new Standards and Procedures (October 2019)
- Culture shift present in redeveloped standards (Holiday 2019)
- 120 comments and counting . . . ATS membership weighs in on proposed Standards (January 2020)
- A premise, a promise, and a prayer: update on redeveloped Standards (March 2020)

***The 2020 vote***

- Once-in-a-generation motion to occur at ATS Biennial Meeting (May 2020)
- ATS membership approves once-in-a-generation new *Standards of Accreditation* during online Biennial Meeting (June 2020)
- The year of educating and implementing new *ATS Standards of Accreditation* (June 2020)

***After the vote***

- Redevelopment Task Force has done its work—yours is just beginning (June 2020)
- New ATS Standards provide framework for global sustainability among theological libraries (Holiday 2020)