

# 2020 STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION



The Association of Theological Schools  
The Commission on Accrediting

***Standards of Accreditation***  
**for The Commission on Accrediting**  
**of The Association of Theological Schools**

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## Preamble to Standards of Accreditation

### Standards and Accreditation

Accreditation is about quality assurance for various publics and ongoing improvement for theological schools, especially regarding student learning and formation. It is a voluntary process through which schools mutually assure one another's educational quality with an eye toward ongoing improvement, based on standards. Through self-review, a school has regular opportunities to reflect intentionally on its distinctive strengths and its areas of desired growth in light of its unique mission and distinct context and in light of the standards. Self-review then supports the school's efforts in planning, evaluation, and imagination. Through peer review, an accredited school is endorsed by its peers as one of quality and integrity, which affirms the school's value to society, as well as its trustworthiness.

Within the context of graduate theological education, accreditation is an ongoing way to live into the intersections of faith and learning. It involves giving close attention to the histories that ground us and the visions of the future that draw us forward. It is grounded in care for people, communities, and schools, now and in the future. It emphasizes stewardship and responsibility, while also holding space for grace and interdependence. It acknowledges the centrality of the unique mission of each individual school, while also recognizing that there is more that brings us together than separates us. Accreditation helps schools improve—not simply for their own sake, but primarily for the benefit of others, including the religious communities and other constituencies who serve and are served by their students. For all these reasons, accreditation is a deeply theological act with a focus on students, especially on student learning and formation.

### Standards and Membership Priorities

Since 1936, the ATS Commission on Accrediting has maintained standards for its member schools, developed and approved by the membership—always with a focus on how those standards can help member schools improve in educational quality for the sake of their students. The current standards, approved in 2020, are based on the following membership priorities:

- A. The standards seek in all ways to embody the ATS mission: *“to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public”* and the ATS Commission purpose: *“to contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools.”*
- B. The standards recognize and respect member schools' unique missions and distinctive theological commitments, while upholding common understandings and aspirations that draw us together as a community amidst our diversity.
- C. The standards are based on a bond of trust between member schools and peer reviewers, including the ATS Board of Commissioners and the ATS staff. Integrity and transparency, along with reliable evidence and professional judgment, are crucial to the accreditation process.
- D. The standards ensure through evidence (qualitative and quantitative) that schools are effectively accomplishing their educational missions and continually seeking to improve in the achievement of those missions.
- E. The standards focus primarily on the quality of graduate theological education, attending to how well student learning and formation is achieved, however and wherever students are engaged.
- F. The standards focus on the health of both schools and the individual degree programs they offer.

- G. The standards seek to simplify the task of accreditation in ways that support member schools and their publics, including students and the communities they seek to serve, with an emphasis on accountability, creativity, flexibility, and sustainability.

### **Standards and Their Purposes**

These standards emphasize a return to first principles: why does the school exist and in what ways does it contribute to the betterment of faith communities and society. They articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the ATS membership over many decades, while also attending to the diversity and variety of our schools today. As such, the standards reflect agreed-upon educational principles that help each member school better achieve its distinctive mission in light of its particular context. They assure the public of each school's educational quality—based on the professional judgment of peer and public members. They also foster flexibility and innovation. In all these ways, these standards help schools embody their missions, grow in light of their missions, and be transparent about their missions.

These standards are designed to be used in the following ways: (1) by a school in a self-study process to evaluate how well it meets the standards, culminating in a self-study report; (2) by a group of peer evaluators who review the self-study report and visit the school to verify how well it meets the standards, culminating in an evaluation committee report; and (3) by a representative and publicly recognized accrediting body of peers and public members (called commissioners) who review the school's self-study report and the evaluation committee's report in light of the standards, culminating in a decision to grant or renew (or not) the school's accreditation for a specified period of time, with any specified conditions. Standards are also used by a school seeking approval for a substantive change outside of its current accreditation scope (e.g., initiating a degree at a new level) and by commissioners in determining whether to approve any such change. Beyond all these formal outcomes, these standards also attempt to describe graduate theological education in ways that serve our schools and students now and help them grow into the future.

### **Standards and Their Interpretation**

These standards articulate *principles of quality for graduate theological education that all schools meet in various ways*. “*Principles of quality*” means these statements focus on principles that the membership collectively views as characteristic of quality. “*For graduate theological education*” means these standards focus on quality for graduate schools of theology, not the entire enterprise of theological education. “*That all schools meet*” means these are standards, not suggestions, and all schools are held accountable to them. “*In various ways*” means each school has flexibility in how it meets them, which reflects a clear commitment in these standards to contextualized accountability. “*In various ways*” also means that every school can find room for improvement, which reflects their “aspirational” nature. These standards are founded upon and framed by ten educational principles listed in the *Self-Study Handbook*.

Because these standards focus on principles, they do not assume one particular type or structure of school to be “the norm.” For example, previous versions of the Commission standards assumed that most schools were freestanding, and that any other type of school must then explain how it differed from that norm. These standards attend to the reality that a majority of member schools are in significant relationships with other partners, whether a university/college, a denomination/ecclesial body, another ATS school, a consortium of schools, or some other model. At times, the term “embedded school” is used in these standards to highlight issues that might be particularly significant to schools that

are organized around such partnerships. However, these standards do not have a separate set or subset of standards for embedded schools; instead, all schools are held accountable to all standards—within the context described in these standards.

These standards are all stated as simple declarative sentences (e.g., “planning focuses on...”), rather than as “shall” or “should” or “must” statements. They are also stated in ways that allow for a range of responses (not a simple “meets/doesn’t meet”) and in ways that reflect the “highest (not lowest) common denominator.” They frequently use words like “appropriate” and “in ways consistent with the school’s mission.” That is intentional, to underscore that written standards must be interpreted—first by the school in its context, next by a group of peer evaluators with their professional judgment, and finally by a Board of Commissioners who are elected by and act on behalf of the membership. The importance of interpretation does not mean that these standards can mean whatever a school or an evaluation committee or the Board wants them to mean. The structure and style of these standards speak to that issue in three important ways:

- (1) Each standard has an opening paragraph that provides a clear and concise summary of that standard and introduces essential elements of that standard.
- (2) Each summary standard is followed by a series of numbered statements, all of which are considered part of that standard, that clarify and amplify that standard’s essential elements.
- (3) The numbered statements [in the version with Self-Study Ideas] are followed by Self-Study Ideas (in shaded boxes) that are meant to give schools *ideas* about how they might engage the standards in their self-study reports. These *ideas* mostly use the word “might” to indicate that these are not the only ways schools can demonstrate that they meet the standards—which they must do in some way—nor are these necessarily the best ways for all schools. Some *ideas* use the word “should” to describe common expectations that derive directly from the standards or that address specific Commission requirements. Seven *ideas* use the word “must” to highlight regulatory requirements for Title IV schools—summarized in 1.6 (see 3.2, 3.11, 3.12, 7.5, 7.9, 7.11, and 10.7; see Appendix in *Self-Study Handbook*). Schools, however, should focus on the standards, not the *ideas* nor nuances between “might” or “should.” The *ideas* are mostly optional and to be used only if they are helpful. In no sense are the *ideas* to be viewed as subsidiary standards, which they are not. The Board and evaluation committees will review schools on the basis of the *Standards* and *Policies*, not the *ideas*.

[NOTE: The Board has developed a new *Self-Study Handbook* that provides further information about the self-study process, including how schools that are dually accredited can use evidence for both agencies and how self-study reports (up to one-half shorter than now) can be streamlined in ways appropriate to each school’s context and resources.]

Finally, the standards are written to be read holistically, with other standards often providing broader context or more specific nuance to a particular standard. An issue raised in one standard may be raised in other standards with additional perspectives. For example, mission is introduced in Standard 1 but is raised again in every other standard, emphasizing the centrality of that issue. For another example, diversity is raised initially in Standard 1.5 from a broad perspective but is raised in several other standards (e.g., Standard 7.3 on students and Standard 8.2 on faculty) with more specific emphases. Standards are best interpreted in light of all the standards as a whole.

# Standards of Accreditation

## Standard 1. Mission and Integrity

**1. Mission and Integrity:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning guided by theological missions that are achieved with institutional integrity. Schools have missions appropriate to graduate theological education and to their own contexts. Missions are clearly and publicly stated, widely accepted, broadly used, regularly reviewed, and changed as needed. In achieving their missions, schools conduct their activities with institutional integrity, especially in areas related to human interactions, diversity, legal obligations, and Commission responsibilities.

### *Mission*

**1.1** The school's mission is appropriate to the purposes and values of graduate theological education and to its own context and constituencies. The mission is clearly and publicly stated and articulates the school's primary purpose(s), institutional identity, and key constituencies served. However expressed, student learning and formation are central to the school's mission.

**1.2** The school's mission is widely accepted by key constituencies—internal and external—and is used broadly by the school to guide its institutional and educational activities, including planning, evaluation, resource allocation, and decision-making.

**1.3** The school's mission statement is regularly reviewed by the appropriate governing body and other key leaders to ensure that it continues to reflect the school's current realities and future hopes.

### *Integrity*

**1.4** The school acts with integrity in its interactions with internal constituents (faculty, staff, students, and others) and external constituents (including the broader public). The school's integrity is grounded in its identity and theological commitments; is demonstrated through policies and practices that highlight fairness, honesty, and accountability; and is manifested in a healthy institutional environment with effective patterns of leadership, transparency, and communications. Institutional integrity also includes how the school attends to global awareness and engagement within the context of its mission, theological commitments, and resources.

**1.5** 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.

**1.6** The school acts with integrity by following all applicable laws and regulations, beginning with documents that demonstrate its authority to operate and confer degrees wherever it does so. Any school that participates in US federal student aid programs meets all governmental regulations for those programs.

**1.7** The school acts with integrity in its Commission membership responsibilities by following all applicable *Standards* and *Policies and Procedures* and by responding accurately and punctually to accreditation-related requests from the Board of Commissioners.

## Standard 2. Planning and Evaluation

**2. Planning and Evaluation:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning guided by institutional visions that inform thoughtful planning grounded in ongoing evaluation. Planning is a mission-guided and broad-based process that focuses on strategic priorities in light of current realities, resulting in a plan that is appropriately resourced, actively implemented, regularly reviewed, and periodically updated. Evaluation is a simple, systematic, and sustained process that helps schools understand how well they are achieving their missions and then helps schools use that information to better achieve their missions, especially regarding student learning and formation.

### *Planning*

**2.1** Planning is a mission-guided process that seeks appropriate ways to better achieve the school's purpose(s) amidst changing circumstances. It is a broad-based process that engages appropriate constituencies to develop a plan that is widely owned.

**2.2** Planning focuses on priorities that are most strategic for achieving the school's mission and vision and that recognize both the school's current realities and future possibilities.

**2.3** Planning results in a written plan that articulates the school's strategic priorities in ways that clarify how each priority will be achieved, including appropriate human, financial, physical, and technological resources needed for that priority.

**2.4** The school's plan is actively implemented, regularly evaluated, and revised as needed, attending not only to individual priorities but also to the plan's overall ability to help the school advance its mission.

### *Evaluation*

**2.5** Evaluation is a process that engages appropriate constituencies to discern how well the various aspects of the school's mission are being achieved and how its educational and institutional outcomes could be maintained if met or improved if not met. Evaluation attends to all functions, personnel, and programs of the school. Evaluation also informs the school's planning and budgeting processes.

**2.6** Evaluation is a simple, systematic, and sustained process that (a) identifies key educational and institutional outcomes (including learning outcomes for each degree program); (b) systematically and regularly gathers evidence related to each outcome (with a mixture of direct and indirect measures and quantitative and qualitative data); (c) engages appropriate stakeholders (especially faculty for educational outcomes) on a sustained basis to analyze and reflect upon how well the evidence indicates that each educational and institutional outcome is being achieved; and (d) uses those analyses and reflections for educational and institutional improvement.

**2.7** Evaluation is formalized in one or more brief, cogently written plans that identify the parties responsible for evaluation and include a list of artifacts or instruments used to measure each outcome, a timeline that indicates how those artifacts or instruments are used, and clear benchmarks for evaluating success. Evaluation plans also indicate how often and by whom the evaluation plan is updated.

**2.8** Evaluation is concerned with both educational quality and institutional effectiveness, though the primary focus for any theological school is on students—how well they are learning and how that learning helps them achieve appropriate personal and vocational goals. In the interests of public transparency, the school publishes a statement of educational effectiveness, giving evidence of educational quality by documenting appropriate areas of student achievement for each degree program (e.g., student learning outcomes data, graduation and placement rates, student satisfaction survey results) and by regularly updating that evidence with current information.

## Standard 3. Student Learning and Formation

**3. Student Learning and Formation:** 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. Schools support student learning and formation through appropriate educational modalities and policies.

### *Components of Student Learning and Formation*

**3.1** The school gives attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation in its institutional goals and its curricular and co-curricular offerings in ways that are consistent with the school's mission and religious identity.

**3.2** The school demonstrates academic rigor in student learning and formation, with qualified instructors, scholarly research and resources, and graduate-level expectations appropriate to each degree it offers.

**3.3** The school demonstrates intercultural competency in student learning and formation by helping students understand, respect, engage, and learn from diverse communities and multicultural perspectives, inside and outside the classroom.

**3.4** The school demonstrates global awareness and engagement in student learning and formation by helping students respect, engage, and learn from global perspectives and sources, understand the global connectedness and mutuality of theological education, and increase their capacities for service and learning in globally interconnected contexts.

**3.5** The school demonstrates an understanding of learning and formation as lifetime pursuits by helping students develop motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning.

### *Educational Modalities Supporting Student Learning and Formation*

**3.6** The school demonstrates sound pedagogy in student learning and formation, utilizing effective instructional designs and employing educational modalities that (a) are appropriate to its mission and capacities, (b) meet all applicable *Standards* and *Policies and Procedures*, and (c) help students achieve the learning outcomes for a given degree.

**3.7** The school demonstrates an intentionally collaborative approach to student learning and formation by developing a cohesive and holistic curriculum, regardless of modality, that involves faculty and, as appropriate to the school's context and degree programs, librarians, student services personnel, field educators, and others—both in designing and in evaluating the curriculum.

**3.8** The school demonstrates that instructors and students have appropriate training and resources to engage well in each modality that it utilizes and that all necessary physical or technological resources are readily accessible, equitably available, adequately staffed, and appropriately maintained.

**3.9** The school demonstrates, in all courses leading to a degree, regular and substantive interaction between qualified instructors and students and among students, regardless of modality. Such interaction includes the following components: (a) instructors are appropriately qualified; (b) instructors



initiate substantive, course-related interactions with students, including evaluating student work; and (c) those interactions occur on a regular basis between instructors and students, as well as among students, in a sufficiently viable community of learning. The school may offer individualized instruction, such as independent studies or individualized field education, provided it meets the first two components and is limited to meeting appropriate student needs or particular degree program requirements, but not an entire degree (*Policies and Procedures*, IV.F, prohibits correspondence education).

**3.10** Any school considering any other educational modality that does not address all three components described in Standard 3.9, including any modality not based on courses, is required to petition for approval of an experiment (see *Policies and Procedures*, IV.G).

### ***Educational Policies Supporting Student Learning and Formation***

**3.11** The school states publicly, follows consistently, and reviews regularly various policies for its degree programs, including tuition and fee charges, refund and withdrawal policies, grading policies, grade appeal policies, degree program requirements, graduation requirements, and whether any of the requirements for a degree program are to be completed within a specified number of years.

**3.12** The school has and follows a public transfer of credit policy that clearly identifies the criteria by which it evaluates transfer credits from other graduate schools and the maximum amount of transfer credits it accepts for its degree programs, which may not exceed two-thirds of the program's total credits.

**3.13** Any school with reduced-credit options for master's degrees (through some form of advanced standing, shared credits, or combined undergraduate/graduate degrees) has clearly stated policies with appropriate criteria for doing so in ways that ensure the integrity and learning outcomes of the degree program. Advanced standing may not exceed one-third of the degree being sought; shared credits between degrees may not exceed two-thirds of the degree receiving those credits; and combined undergraduate/graduate degrees may generally not count undergraduate credits as graduate credits. A school utilizing any combination of these reduced-credit options requires that at least one-third of any degree it grants be from credits earned at that school in that degree (see *Guidelines for Reduced-Credit Master's Degrees*; this standard does not prohibit schools from offering a one-year academic MA degree for students with extensive undergraduate studies in religion or related areas, per pre-2020 Standards).

**3.14** The school has and follows clearly stated policies regarding the ethical and appropriate use of technology and research resources, including appropriate guidelines for research with human participants that meet all applicable laws and regulations.

### ***Educational Policies for Non-Degree Programs***

**3.15** The school may offer non-degree programs (e.g., certificates) without credit for personal enrichment or with graduate credit for potential use in a graduate degree program, though the Commission approves and records only graduate degrees. If non-degree programs are offered for graduate credit, the school admits students with an accredited baccalaureate degree or its educational equivalent. The school may admit other students if it documents through rigorous means that those students are prepared to do graduate-level work.

## Standard 4. Master's Degrees

**4. Master's Degree Programs:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning offering master's degrees that are appropriate to their missions, constituencies, and capacities and that meet all applicable degree program requirements. Master's degrees have clearly stated student learning outcomes that are regularly evaluated, with the results used to improve student learning and formation.

### *Master of Divinity*

**4.1** The Master of Divinity degree prepares people for religious leadership or service in congregations and other settings, as well as for advanced degrees. This degree requires a minimum of 72 semester credits or equivalent units.

**4.2** The Master of Divinity (abbreviated as MDiv) is the standard nomenclature for this degree. The school may offer this degree with specializations or tracks and use those names in official publications, but the Commission recognizes and records this degree only as Master of Divinity. Any school using a different nomenclature for historical or theological reasons has Commission approval.

**4.3** The Master of Divinity degree is broadly and deeply attentive to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation in ways consistent with the school's mission and theological commitments. The degree has clearly articulated learning outcomes that address each of the following four areas, though the school may use different terms for these areas: (a) *religious heritage*, including understanding of scripture, the theological traditions and history of the school's faith community, and the broader heritage of other relevant religious traditions; (b) *cultural context*, including attention to cultural and social issues, to global awareness and engagement, and to the multifaith and multicultural nature of the societies in which students may serve; (c) *personal and spiritual formation*, including development in personal faith, professional ethics, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and spirituality; and (d) *religious and public leadership*, including cultivating capacities for leading in ecclesial or denominational and public contexts and reflecting on leadership practices.

**4.4** The Master of Divinity degree requires supervised practical experiences (e.g., practicum or internship) in areas related to the student's vocational calling in order to achieve the learning outcomes of the degree program. These experiences are in settings that are appropriately chosen, well suited to the experience needed, and of sufficient duration. These experiences are also supervised by those who are appropriately qualified, professionally developed, and regularly evaluated.

**4.5** The Master of Divinity degree program as a whole and each of its specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

### *Master of Arts*

**4.6** The Master of Arts degree prepares people in one of three ways: (a) primarily *academically* for graduate study of one or more theologically related disciplines, including personal enrichment; (b) primarily *professionally* for some form of religious leadership or other kinds of service; or (c) both *academically and professionally* with each receiving similar attention. Each Master of Arts degree offered by a school has a clear purpose statement that indicates which of these ways is primary. The degree requires a minimum of 36 semester credits or equivalent units.

**4.7** The Master of Arts degree has various nomenclatures, depending on its purpose and on certain provincial, state, or ecclesial or denominational regulations. The most common nomenclature is Master of Arts (abbreviated as MA), but the school may choose other appropriate nomenclatures that suit the degree's purpose and setting. Other common names for this degree are Master of Theological Studies (MTS), Master of Arts in Religion (MAR), Master of Religious Education (MRE), Master of Church Music (MCM), Master of [specialization], Master of Arts in [specialization], and Master of Arts [(specialization)]. The school may use any appropriate nomenclature, but it may not change that nomenclature without notifying the Commission (see *Policies and Procedures*, IV.D.1) so an accurate record of all approved degrees can be maintained.

**4.8** The Master of Arts degree has clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are appropriate to a graduate theological degree (including any specializations in that degree) and are consistent with the school's mission and resources. A degree that is primarily academically oriented typically has some form of capstone research project (e.g., thesis or extended research paper), while one that is primarily professionally oriented typically has some form of supervised practical experience that meets the requirements in Standard 4.4. Master's degrees that are oriented both professionally and academically have appropriate options (e.g., practicum, thesis, or other).

**4.9** The Master of Arts degree program as a whole and each of its specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

#### ***Master of Theology (Master of Sacred Theology)***

**4.10** The Master of Theology degree (or Master of Sacred Theology) is an advanced, academically oriented, master's degree for people who already have a Master of Divinity degree or other graduate theological degree providing equivalent academic background. This degree prepares people to study more deeply a theologically related discipline, often in preparation for doctoral studies. Since it builds upon a previous master's degree, this degree may require as few as 24 semester credits or equivalent units. The only nomenclature normally allowed for this degree is Master of Theology (abbreviated as ThM or sometimes MTh) or Master of Sacred Theology (abbreviated as STM).

**4.11** The Master of Theology degree has clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are appropriate to an advanced degree in theology and consistent with the school's mission and resources. The degree has at least half of the coursework in courses designed for students in advanced, academically oriented degree programs (i.e., ThM/STM or PhD/ThD). If the degree has language requirements, these are appropriate to the field of specialization. The program typically culminates in a thesis demonstrating scholarly research.

**4.12** The Master of Theology degree program as a whole and each of its specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

## Standard 5. Doctoral Degrees

**5. Doctoral Degree Programs:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning that may offer doctoral degrees appropriate to their missions, constituencies, and capacities and that meet all applicable degree program requirements. Doctoral degrees have clearly stated student learning outcomes that are regularly evaluated, with the results used to improve student learning and formation.

### *Doctor of Ministry*

**5.1** The Doctor of Ministry is an advanced, professionally oriented degree that prepares people more deeply for religious leadership in congregations and other settings, including appropriate teaching roles. This degree requires a minimum of 30 semester credits or equivalent units.

**5.2** The Doctor of Ministry degree (abbreviated as DMin) is the only nomenclature allowed for this degree. The school may offer this degree with specializations or tracks and use those names in official publications, but the Commission recognizes and records this degree only as Doctor of Ministry.

**5.3** The Doctor of Ministry degree has clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are consistent with the school's mission and resources and address the following four areas: (a) *advanced theological integration* that helps graduates effectively engage their cultural context with theological acumen and critical thinking; (b) *in-depth contextual competency* that gives graduates the ability to identify, frame, and respond to crucial ministry issues; (c) *leadership capacity* that equips graduates to enhance their effectiveness as ministry leaders in their chosen settings; and (d) *personal and spiritual maturity* that enables graduates to reinvigorate and deepen their vocational calling.

**5.4** The Doctor of Ministry degree provides a variety of student learning and formational experiences that include peer learning, self-directed learning, research-based learning, and field-based learning. The degree culminates with a written project that explores an area of ministry related to the student's vocational calling, utilizes appropriate research methodologies and resources, and generates new knowledge regarding the practice of ministry. An oral presentation and evaluation follow the completion of the written project to reflect mastery of the project and achievement of the program's outcomes. If any courses in this degree are shared with other degrees, doctoral-level outcomes and assignments specific to students in this professional degree are made clear.

**5.5** The Doctor of Ministry degree is an advanced professional doctorate that builds upon an accredited master's degree in a ministry-related area and upon significant ministry experience. Students without an accredited Master of Divinity degree may be admitted, provided the school has publicly stated admissions criteria that address the following six areas and provided the school documents how each applicant meets each of these criteria: (a) the ability to thoughtfully interpret scripture and the theological tradition of one's ministry context, (b) the capacity to understand and adapt one's ministry to the cultural context, (c) a basic self-understanding of one's ministerial identity and vocational calling, (d) a readiness to engage in ongoing personal and spiritual formation for one's ministry, (e) an accredited master's degree (or its educational equivalent) in an area related to one's ministry setting or vocational calling, and (f) significant ministerial experience that enables the applicant to engage as a ministry peer with other students in this advanced professional doctorate.

**5.6** The Doctor of Ministry degree program as a whole and each of its specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

### ***Other Professional Doctoral Degrees***

**5.7** Other professionally oriented doctoral degrees (besides the Doctor of Ministry) prepare people more deeply for religious leadership or other kinds of service in a variety of settings, such as education and intercultural studies. These doctoral degrees require a minimum of 36 semester credits or equivalent units.

**5.8** These professional doctoral degrees use a variety of nomenclatures, depending on the discipline, such as Doctor of Education (abbreviated as EdD), Doctor of Educational Ministry (DEdMin), Doctor of Intercultural Studies (DICS), Doctor of Missiology (DMiss), Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), or Doctor of \_\_\_\_, with the name of the specialization inserted. The school may use any appropriate nomenclature, but it may not change that nomenclature without notifying the Commission (see *Policies and Procedures*, IV.D.1) so an accurate record of all approved degrees can be maintained.

**5.9** These professional doctoral degrees have clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are consistent with the school's mission and resources. The outcomes focus on the degree discipline in areas related to advanced understandings of, and competencies in, appropriate theological disciplines, behavioral sciences, social sciences, research methodologies, and the integration of those areas in a well-designed doctoral dissertation, written project, culminating report on field-based research, or other summative exercise. If any courses in this degree are shared with other degrees, doctoral-level outcomes and assignments specific to students in this professional degree are made clear.

**5.10** These professional doctoral degree programs as a whole and each of their specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

### ***Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Theology***

**5.11** The Doctor of Philosophy degree is an advanced, academically oriented degree that prepares people for theologically related vocations of teaching and research in theological schools, in colleges and universities, or in other settings appropriate to the degree. This degree requires a minimum of 36 semester credits or equivalent units.

**5.12** The Doctor of Philosophy degree (abbreviated as PhD) is the standard nomenclature for this degree, though some schools may use Doctor of Theology (ThD). The school may offer this degree with specializations or tracks and use those names in official publications, but the Commission recognizes and records this degree only as Doctor of Philosophy (or Doctor of Theology)—unless the school specifically requests approval only for a particular specialization, in which case that specialization is included in the Commission approval and records.

**5.13** The Doctor of Philosophy degree has clearly stated student learning outcomes that are consistent with the school's mission and resources. The outcomes address such issues as gaining a comprehensive knowledge of the discipline(s) studied; developing competence to engage in original research and writing that advances theological understanding for the academy and for communities of faith; and demonstrating capacities for the vocation of theological scholarship in research, teaching and learning, and formation.

**5.14** The Doctor of Philosophy degree requires appropriate training in the research methods relevant to the area of specialization, the ability to use languages germane to the specialization, and opportunities to develop competence in teaching and forming students. The degree requires coursework,

comprehensive examinations, a written doctoral dissertation that demonstrates original and scholarly research, and an oral defense of the dissertation. If any courses in this degree are shared with other degrees, outcomes and assignments consistent with advanced research doctorates and specific to students in this degree are made clear.

**5.15** The Doctor of Philosophy degree requires at least half of the coursework to be completed on the school's main campus. For appropriate reasons, the school may petition for an exception to residency that replaces on-campus coursework with synchronous online courses or with courses offered at additional locations (see *Policies and Procedures*, IV.E-G). The Commission does not approve PhD/ThD programs that offer most or all of their courses asynchronously, since teaching students to engage others orally and to respond to questions immediately and thoughtfully are key values for this degree.

**5.16** The Doctor of Philosophy degree program as a whole and each of its specific student learning outcomes are regularly evaluated, with the results discussed by faculty and used to improve student learning and formation.

## Standard 6. Library and Information Services

**6. Library and Information Services:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning grounded in the historical resources of the tradition, the scholarship of the academic disciplines, and the wisdom of communities of practice. Theological libraries are curated collections and instructional centers with librarians guiding research and organizing access to appropriate resources. Libraries and librarians partner with faculty in student learning and formation to serve schools' educational missions and to equip students to be effective and ethical users of information resources.

### *Library Purpose and Role*

**6.1** The library has a clear statement that identifies its purpose and role in the school and the ways it contributes to achieving the school's educational mission. The library's purpose statement forms the foundation for evaluating library and information services.

**6.2** The library is understood by the school's leadership and stakeholders as a central academic resource that enhances the school's educational programs. Library and information services personnel play a significant and collaborative role in curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation.

### *Library Staffing and Evaluation*

**6.3** Library and information services personnel are of sufficient number, have appropriate qualifications and expertise, and are supported by adequate resources and opportunities for ongoing professional development.

**6.4** Library and information services personnel are appropriately integrated into the school's leadership, faculty, and decision-making structures, including budgeting and strategic planning processes.

**6.5** Library and information services personnel regularly evaluate the adequacy and use of services and resources, including those provided contractually or collaboratively, documenting that the information needs of the school's students and faculty are met in ways that are appropriate to the school's educational mission, degree programs, and educational modalities.

### *Library Services and Resources*

**6.6.** The library offers services that enhance student learning and formation and partners with faculty in teaching, learning, and research. Librarians provide reference services, help users navigate research resources, teach information literacy skills, support the scholarly and educational work of the school, and foster lifelong learning.

**6.7** The library curates and organizes a coherent collection of resources sufficient in quality, quantity, currency, and depth to support the school's courses and degree programs, to encourage research and exploration beyond the requirements of the academic program, and to enable interaction with a wide range of perspectives, including theological and cultural diversity and global voices.

**6.8** The library has a collection development and access policy that is consistently used, regularly evaluated, and periodically updated to ensure it meets the current and future needs of the school.

**6.9** The library has sufficient financial, technological, and physical resources to accomplish its purpose and to give equitable attention and access to all the school's degree programs and modes of educational delivery.

**6.10** The library provides environments conducive to learning and scholarly research, with appropriate agreements for its contracted or consortial resources.

## Standard 7. Student Services

**7. Student Services:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning with a central focus on students and on serving them well. Student services personnel share responsibility with faculty, administrators, staff, and students themselves for creating the conditions under which students engage appropriately in educationally purposeful activities. Student services personnel help foster supportive learning environments, bridge organizational boundaries, and form collaborative partnerships to enhance student learning and formation. These services contribute to the school's overall mission and consider the specific needs of students pursuing graduate theological education.

### *Student Services Personnel*

**7.1** The school has or has access to a sufficient number of qualified student services personnel to meet the needs of students. These personnel receive adequate resources and professional development to accomplish their work effectively, participate in institutional decisions affecting student services, and advocate for the particular needs of students in their context.

### *Student Recruitment and Admissions*

**7.2** The school has recruitment policies and practices that are consistent with its mission, resources, constituencies, and educational offerings. Those policies and practices accurately represent the school and the vocational opportunities related to its degree programs.

**7.3** The school has clearly defined admissions policies appropriate to each degree program it offers and to the school's mission and vision. These policies are fairly implemented and encourage diversity appropriate to the school's context and theological commitments. Policies are reviewed regularly to ensure the overall quality of the student population, as well as a sufficient community of learning in each degree program.

**7.4** The school admits students to master's degrees who have an accredited baccalaureate degree or its educational equivalent and meet any other requirements specified for that master's degree. Students without an accredited baccalaureate degree or its equivalent may be admitted to a master's degree if the school documents through rigorous means that those students are prepared to do master's-level work. Students admitted to doctoral degrees have an accredited master's degree or its educational equivalent in a field deemed appropriate by the school and meet any other requirements specified for that doctoral degree.

### *Student Support Services*

**7.5** The school has appropriate, reliable, and accessible support services and programming for all students. Services and programs are designed to create an environment in which student learning and formation is fostered, retention is strengthened, and student safety is addressed. These services are regularly evaluated to ensure they are appropriate and adequate for the school, its degree programs, its delivery modes, and the diversity of its student community. A school that utilizes student services of another entity demonstrates the effectiveness of those services for its theological students.

**7.6** The school communicates clearly to all students their rights and responsibilities, the school's code of conduct, and appropriate procedures for making formal complaints. The school publicizes a defined process for responding to complaints raised by students, and it maintains records of formal complaints related to the *Standards* and *Policies*, the process followed, and the decisions made.



**7.7** The school adequately maintains student records related to admissions, coursework, and other areas as determined by its programs and policies. These records are appropriately secured from loss or unauthorized access. The school maintains the privacy of student information in ways that meet all applicable laws and regulations, including, as necessary, those from ecclesial or denominational bodies.

***Student Financial Aid and Borrowing***

**7.8** The school has equitable and nondiscriminatory systems for processing financial aid that meet all applicable laws and regulations. Financial aid policies and processes are published, available to all students, regularly reviewed by the school, and updated as needed.

**7.9** The school regularly reviews student educational debt and, as necessary, develops strategies to minimize borrowing, explores alternative funding, and communicates to students the potential consequences of educational debt.

***Student Career and Placement Services***

**7.10** The school ensures that students have access to appropriate vocational counseling and placement guidance or services that are relevant to their degrees and consistent with the school's mission and religious context.

**7.11** The school monitors the placement of graduates and regularly gathers feedback on the school's educational effectiveness from graduates and the places where they serve. Admissions policies and curricula are regularly reviewed and adjusted to ensure that students are adequately prepared to serve in their particular vocational contexts.

## Standard 8. Faculty

**8. Faculty:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning dependent upon a qualified, supported, and effective faculty of sufficient size and diversity to achieve schools' educational missions and support student learning and formation. Faculty responsibilities, composition, and qualifications are clearly defined and appropriate to graduate theological education. Faculty are supported and provided ongoing opportunities for professional development. Faculty roles in teaching and learning, scholarship, and service are clear and consistent with schools' missions and are fulfilled effectively by the faculty.

### *Faculty Responsibilities, Composition, and Qualifications*

**8.1** The responsibilities of the faculty are clearly defined and appropriate to graduate theological education. A key ongoing responsibility for the faculty as a whole is to design, implement, evaluate, and improve the school's educational programs in collaboration with other appropriate parties. Faculty meet collectively and regularly to discuss and implement that curricular responsibility.

**8.2** The composition of the faculty is sufficient in number and diversity—demographically and educationally—to achieve the school's mission, in light of the number and nature of its degree programs, the size and composition of its student body, and the scope of its theological commitments. Faculty classifications (e.g., full-time/part-time, tenured/non-tenured, ranked/non-ranked, etc.) are clear, fair to those faculty affected, consistently applied, and appropriate to the school's mission, context, and academic offerings. The school has a stable core of faculty.

**8.3** The qualifications of the faculty are appropriate to graduate theological education, typically demonstrated through each faculty member having an appropriate doctorate and relevant professional/ecclesial/denominational experience. Any school employing faculty without a doctorate documents that such faculty have suitable qualifications. All core faculty (with their names and qualifications) are published in a readily accessible location.

### *Faculty Support and Development*

**8.4** The school supports faculty (whether full-time or part-time) in a variety of ways, including adequate compensation, appropriate workload, suitable working conditions, and sufficient support services.

**8.5** The school has and consistently follows fair and ethical policies and procedures for recruiting, appointing, caring for, evaluating, promoting, and, when necessary, dismissing faculty. All policies and procedures concerning these matters are published in a faculty handbook or similar document that is regularly reviewed and updated as needed.

**8.6** The school supports and safeguards freedom of inquiry for faculty with policies and procedures that are consistent with the mission and theological commitments of the school. Those policies and procedures are clearly published, consistently followed, regularly reviewed, and updated as needed.

**8.7** The school provides ongoing opportunities and sufficient funds for faculty to develop professionally in ways consistent with the school's mission and needs, with the changing nature of graduate theological education, and with assigned faculty responsibilities—both ongoing and new. Faculty development opportunities are regularly budgeted and implemented, clearly communicated, and systematically evaluated.

***Faculty Roles in Teaching and Learning, Scholarship, and Service***

**8.8** The faculty role in teaching and learning includes faculty sharing their expertise with students, using effective pedagogies, being available to students, providing regular and prompt feedback to students, respecting and engaging the diversities that students bring to their educational experiences, and enhancing students' capacities to serve in a religiously diverse, multicultural, and globally interconnected world.

**8.9** The faculty role in scholarship encompasses faculty staying current in their fields, engaging in research appropriate to their responsibilities, presenting their findings in ways consistent with their disciplines and the school's constituencies, and participating in professional activities germane to their work. The school supports faculty in their scholarship and has clear and consistent policies and practices on its expectations for faculty scholarship, including how that is evaluated.

**8.10** The faculty role in service covers a wide range of activities, consistent with the school's mission and with faculty members' interests and capacities. Whatever service role faculty play, that role is clearly defined, adequately supported, regularly evaluated, and adjusted as needed.

**8.11** Faculty roles in these three areas, as well as other roles to which faculty are called, are viewed holistically and are understood to be interrelated in support of the mission, ethos, and values of the school. Expectations for faculty roles are clearly defined and are aligned with the school's practices for continuation or promotion. When roles are differentiated, such as for administrative faculty, the school provides clear expectations and appropriate support. Recognizing the particular and changing landscape of theological education, the school attends to the individual and collective vocations of theological faculty.

## Standard 9. Governance and Administration

**9. Governance and Administration:** 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. Governing bodies do that by working collaboratively to establish priorities, develop policies, make decisions, authorize actions, and evaluate outcomes. They are composed of qualified persons who broadly represent their schools' constituencies and understand their fiduciary responsibilities. 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. School administrations are adequately structured, sufficiently staffed, and duly authorized and supported to fulfill their responsibilities.

### *Governance Authority and Qualifications*

**9.1** The school is under the documented authority of a governing body with appropriate legal authority (and ecclesial or denominational, if needed) to ensure that its mission is achieved in ways that demonstrate educational quality and financial sustainability. A school embedded in another entity has 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. A school with a bicameral system of governance documents the authority and responsibilities of each body, such as a board overseeing financial and administrative matters and a senate overseeing academic matters. A school with a governance system where authority is shared with or delegated by an ecclesial or denominational body documents the authority and responsibilities of each body.

**9.2** The 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. New members are appointed through clearly defined processes and are adequately oriented to their responsibilities. The school's governing body exercises its authority collectively as a group, not as individuals, and fulfills its responsibilities on behalf of the school as a whole, using the school's mission to guide all major decisions.

### *Governance Responsibilities and Processes*

**9.3** The school has clear and current documents that describe its governing body's authority, responsibilities, composition, and governance processes. Common responsibilities include ensuring the school's mission is met; setting priorities for the school through strategic planning; selecting, caring for, evaluating, and, when necessary, dismissing the school's chief executive officer; delegating appropriate authority to school administrators and faculty; and managing the school's finances and other assets by approving budgets, entering into contracts, preserving endowed funds, and ensuring annual independent audits.

**9.4** The school has and implements governance processes that help achieve its mission in light of its context and constituencies. These processes include governance structure(s) appropriate to the size and nature of the school, regular meetings of the governing body, clear conflict of interest policies and practices, and safeguards for procedural fairness and freedom of inquiry. The governing body communicates its major decisions in clear and timely ways to all appropriate constituencies.

**9.5** The school's governing body regularly evaluates its responsibilities, processes, and actions and uses those results to improve its effectiveness. The governing body also ensures that the school's mission and

educational and institutional outcomes are regularly evaluated and that the results are used to better achieve the school's mission and improve its various outcomes.

### ***Shared Governance***

**9.6** The school recognizes the value of shared governance in theological education by clearly defining and periodically evaluating how shared governance works in its setting. Shared governance recognizes the appropriate roles and expertise of key constituencies. Shared governance understands that decisions of the governing body are enhanced by seeking the wisdom of the community in collaborative ways, where that is feasible and appropriate, especially decisions impacting the school's educational quality and financial sustainability.

**9.7** The school's governing body delegates to the administration the authority to administer board policies and decisions and manage the school's resources and operations within any appropriate guidelines set by the governing body.

**9.8** The school's governing body delegates to the faculty appropriate authority to oversee the school's academic programs and policies in light of their expertise in those areas. Faculty are also delegated an appropriate role in establishing admissions criteria, in recommending candidates for graduation, and in developing and implementing procedures for appointing, retaining, and promoting faculty.

### ***Administration***

**9.9** The school has an administrative structure adequate to the size and nature of the school and sufficiently staffed to achieve the school's mission. The school has persons who fill the roles of chief executive officer, chief academic officer, and chief financial officer, though one person may fill more than one role. The administration represents the diversity reflected in the school's mission, ecclesial or denominational commitments, and constituencies. Each administrator has appropriate qualifications, clearly defined responsibilities, and the necessary authority and resources to fulfill those responsibilities. Each administrator is regularly evaluated in light of assigned responsibilities, and the results are used to better fulfill or to adjust those responsibilities.

## Standard 10. Institutional Resources

**10. Institutional Resources:** Theological schools are communities of faith and learning reliant upon sufficient and stable resources to achieve their missions. These resources include human, financial, physical, technological, and shared resources that require faithful and effective stewardship. Schools acquire and use these resources in trust for the fulfillment of their missions in ways that are realistic, holistic, and sustainable. Schools give particular attention to their greatest resource, people, by building communities where all persons are valued, respected, and enabled to use their gifts in ways that serve well the mission.

### *Human Resources*

**10.1** The school has a core of employees (staff and faculty) who are well qualified, adequately supported, fairly compensated, and sufficient in number and diversity to achieve the school's mission in light of its size, structure, and theological commitments.

**10.2** The school publishes and consistently applies personnel policies and procedures that ensure a safe, fair, and productive environment, including those regarding procedural fairness, sexual harassment and abuse, other forms of misconduct, nondiscrimination, grievances, hiring, dismissal, and evaluation. Each employee has a written job description that is clear, current, and forms the basis for regular evaluations.

### *Financial Resources*

**10.3** The school has sufficient and stable financial resources to achieve its mission with educational quality and financial sustainability. The school prepares and implements annual budgets, including capital budgets, and develops multi-year budget projections that support the school's mission and reflect its planning and evaluation efforts. Budgeted and actual revenues and expenditures are realistic, holistic, and sustainable, with actual operating results demonstrating a consistent pattern of surpluses over time. Budgets are prepared with appropriate input and are approved and adjusted, as needed, by the school's governing body or other authorized entity. An embedded school demonstrates how the financial resources and budgeting process of the theological school are addressed by the other entity and how effective that is for the school.

**10.4** The school develops its tuition revenue and scholarship strategy in consideration of its mission, planning, financial sustainability, and potential impact on students. If applicable, the school attends to the impact of tuition and other factors on the levels of student educational debt incurred in that school.

**10.5** The school with an endowment develops its investment and spending strategy in consideration of its mission, planning, financial sustainability, and potential impact on the future. The school protects and preserves any endowed funds, including utilizing prudent endowment draws. The school has an investment policy that guides the investment and use of endowed funds, and the policy is appropriate to the school's mission and context.

**10.6** The school develops its donor cultivation and giving strategy in consideration of its mission, planning, financial sustainability, and potential impact on donors. The school respects all donors' intentions, whether their gifts are intended for the endowment or for other purposes. The school has an institutional advancement program that is appropriate to its mission, size, structure, and financial goals.

**10.7** The school has qualified persons sufficient in number to manage well its financial affairs. Financial staff ensure the integrity of financial records, implement appropriate internal control mechanisms, and

provide on a timely basis to key leaders (governing body, chief administrative leaders, and others as appropriate) the information needed to make sound decisions to achieve the school's mission and to ensure that all fiduciary responsibilities are met. The school has internal accounting and reporting systems that are generally accepted in North American higher education. The school has an independent audit conducted every year, and the results are shared with the governing body and others as appropriate. The school addresses any concerns raised in an auditor's management letter or qualified opinion.

### ***Physical Resources***

**10.8** The school has or has access to the physical resources it needs to achieve its mission. The school ensures that the facilities and equipment it uses (whether owned or not) are safe, accessible, in good condition, and meet all regulatory requirements. The school has sufficient work and meeting spaces for students, faculty, and staff that are appropriate to its size and the nature of its educational offerings.

### ***Technological Resources***

**10.9** The school uses technological resources, including information and educational technology, needed to achieve its mission with educational quality. The school has qualified persons in sufficient number and with sufficient support to maintain adequately its technological resources. The school ensures that the people needing to use those resources are appropriately trained. Information shared through technology meets all applicable laws and regulations, including those related to technology security and privacy.

### ***Shared Resources***

**10.10** If the school utilizes shared resources, it does so in ways that help achieve its mission. Resource sharing may range from informal cooperation to formal partnerships with one or more external entities, as well as an embedded school sharing resources internally with the related entity. Formal types of resource sharing with external entities (e.g., cross-appointment of faculty or cross-registration of students, or more expansive forms that include degree-sharing clusters or consortia) are documented in ways that give attention to their nature and purpose, delineations of authority and responsibility, and provisions for periodic review.

