

US presidential executive orders and accreditation

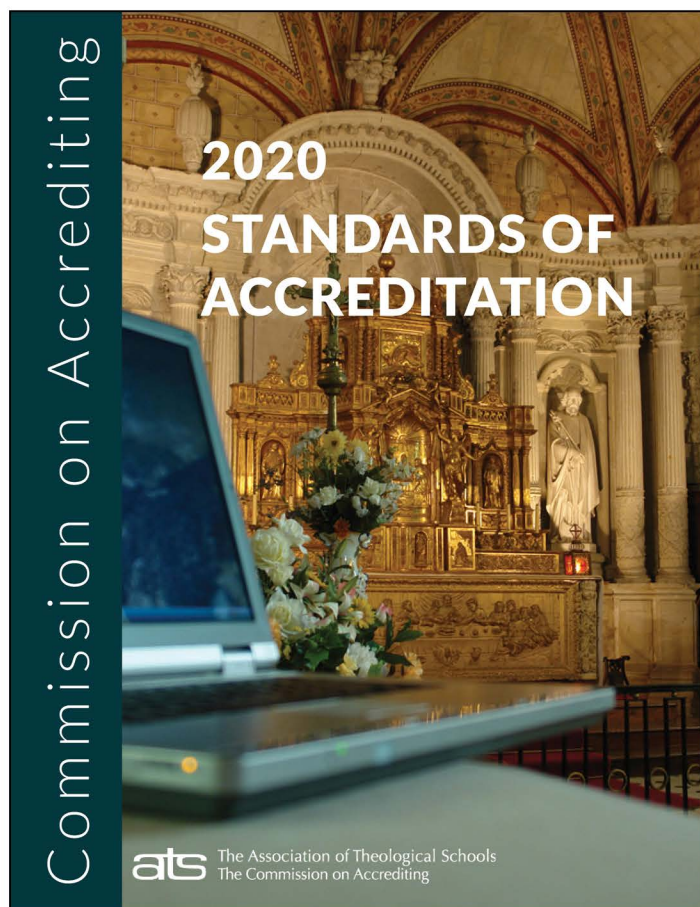
By FRANK YAMADA

As part of our ongoing commitment to keeping you informed, we want to offer guidance regarding how recent executive orders (EOs) from the president of the United States and the February 14, 2025, Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) from the US Department of Education relate to our accreditation standards.

We understand that these orders and agency communications can be complex and sometimes unclear in their application to your specific context. Change can bring uncertainty, particularly the recent EO dismantling the US Department of Education. However, it is important to note that an act of Congress is required to fully abolish the department, meaning the full implications of this order will unfold over time. Please know that we remain committed to supporting you. Together, we will navigate these developments while upholding the high standards of theological education.

Since 1936, the Commission on Accrediting (COA) of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has maintained accreditation standards for member schools. While we are recognized as an accrediting agency by both the US Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, our standards are also shaped and approved by our membership. They embody our shared mission to strengthen theological schools for the benefit of faith communities and the broader public. While each institution has a unique theological identity, our common values unite us in pursuit of excellence.

We also recognize that these developments have a broader



impact beyond the United States. Many of our member schools are in Canada, where theological education operates under a distinct regulatory framework. Although the executive orders do not directly affect the accreditation of Canadian institutions, we remain mindful of potential indirect implications and will continue to monitor the situation and provide guidance as needed. We stand in solidarity with our Canadian schools, listening and offering support as tensions between the US federal government and the government of Canada have intensified. Our shared pursuit of theological education reminds us that our commitment to faith and learning transcends borders.

Specifically, the EOs about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and the DCL relate to these accreditation standards:

- **Standard 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 di-

versity that describes its understanding of and commitment to this membership-wide shared value, and the school uses that stance to enhance its diversity.

- **Standard 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.

It is important to emphasize that, as clearly outlined in Standard 1.6, our accreditation standards, which have been in place for many years, do not require (and have never required) schools to violate any laws. Rather, they affirm that schools must follow all legal and regulatory requirements while complying with our standards. This has always been the case. While ATS can offer guidance and support, each institution must assess its specific circumstances and risk tolerance, engaging legal counsel as needed.

- **Standard 1.5** recognizes that diversity is defined by 16 commitments. As an ecumenical organization, ATS does not prescribe a definition of diversity. Diversity is a principle interwoven throughout our accreditation standards, reflecting its significance in various aspects of theological education.

- **Standards 6.7, 7.3, 7.5, 8.2, 9.2, 9.9, and 10.1** all emphasize the importance of diversity in relation to a school's mission and theological commitments. These standards highlight diversity's role across library resources, admission policies, student services, faculty, board members, administration, and employees. This comprehensive integration underscores that diversity is embedded in and defined by the life and work of each institution.

A commitment to diversity, as defined by each member school, is one of the Association's core values. We affirm that the diversity of our member schools—reflected in their theological traditions, constituencies, and educational approaches—is a visible sign of God's intention for humanity. We encourage each institution to continually define and demonstrate diversity in a way that aligns with its own mission and values.

ATS remains steadfast in its dedication to theological education. We will continue to engage with legal experts, accrediting bodies, and higher education leaders to ensure clarity and consistency in our approach, supporting both our US and Canadian member schools through these changing times.

If you have questions or need additional support, please reach out to me or [Barbara Mutch](#), our senior director of accreditation.



Frank Yamada is executive director at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.