

# Petitioning for International Theological Education

The Commission Standards of Accreditation permit accredited theological schools to offer programs of graduate theological education at sites outside North America. These programs must meet all relevant Standards of Accreditation and be approved by the Board of Commissioners prior to their implementation. These guidelines are provided by the Board of Commissioners to assist schools in the development of proposals and to advise the schools of the issues the Board will consider in its determination as to whether a proposal should be approved as well as the procedures that will be involved in the process of evaluating the proposal and the program.

## Issues and assumptions regarding international theological education programs

### Issues

The Board of Commissioners assesses proposals for programs of credit-granting theological education outside of North America on the basis of the relevant Standards of Accreditation and in the context of a historic concern, a contemporary reality, and a pervasive theme in the Standards.

- The relevant Standards of Accreditation by which proposals for programs will be evaluated include the Standards related to extension education, appropriate *Degree Program Standard(s)*, the *Educational Standard*, and the *General Institutional Standards*. The outline for proposals in these guidelines identifies specific sections of the Standards to be addressed in proposals.
- Historically, efforts to introduce religion by North Americans outside of North America, while well motivated, appear in retrospect to have been imperialistic and to have mingled religious conviction and Western cultural ethos in ways that, ultimately, did not serve well either religion or people outside North America. These guidelines include a variety of criteria by which schools and the Board of Commissioners can assess the cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of the proposal.
- Contemporarily, North American higher education, including theological education, is experiencing a period of rapid change and redefinition. In the context of this pervasive change, the already difficult tasks of definition, design, and management of educational programs offered internationally become even more complex. The Board of Commissioners is responsible for the evaluation and approval of educational programs only as they relate to North American credit-granting forms of education. The guidelines require schools to give thoughtful attention to the North American character of the educational programs for which they are seeking approval.
- The Commission Standards of Accreditation reflect a pervasive theme regarding the importance of the global awareness and engagement of theological education. While *theme* has more than one meaning among Commission member schools, the Standards of Accreditation assert that theological schools in North America must, necessarily, attend to the experience and voices of people

outside of North America and educate persons for religious leadership in ways that prepare them to work effectively among the non-North American cultures pervasively present within North America. The Commission emphasis on global awareness and engagement is not a reason for developing educational programs outside North America; it is a reason for educating North American students in ways that help them transcend their own cultural boundaries and for engaging theological scholarship so that it is widely informed by the understandings that emerge from different cultural contexts. The school's responses to several questions about an internationally delivered program will provide the basis for assessing its capacity to enhance the global awareness and engagement of theological education.

### ***Assumptions***

The Board of Commissioners has identified three assumptions that will be reflected in its review of petitions for programs to be offered internationally:

- In various parts of the world, theological education takes many forms and serves a variety of purposes. North American graduate-professional approaches to theological education represent one of these forms and serve some of these purposes. Neither the Commission nor the Association assumes that North American credit-granting theological education is superior to other forms of theological education or that it is educationally effective in other cultural contexts. North American theological degrees, for a variety of reasons, often may be an inappropriate form of theological education outside of North America. If an institution and its international collaborators conclude that a North American credit-granting program is the most appropriate form to be offered at a site, then the Board of Commissioners and the accredited school have the responsibility to ensure that the program meets all relevant Standards for North American theological education as defined by the Standards of Accreditation. For this reason, the Board of Commissioners expects that the design of a proposed program will reflect collaborative work including the accredited school and its non-North American partner.
- The Board of Commissioners has determined that language is a difficulty—first in the language used to describe the program and second in the language of instruction used in the program. The Standards are written for theological education located in a North American context, and while the Standards require a program that is offered internationally to be culturally appropriate to the setting in which it is offered, the language the Board uses with reference to the degree is North American. Commission Standards of Accreditation do not require the language of instruction to be English, but they do expect the faculty of the school offering the program to be able to oversee the academic quality of the program, which, because of the verbal nature of the theological disciplines, will require skill in the language of instruction.
- In the judgment of the Board of Commissioners, the categories of degree programs approved by the Board reflect differential levels of complexity when proposed to be offered at international

sites. The degree programs that could be offered with greatest ease internationally are those identified as *Basic Programs Oriented Toward General Theological Studies*. Degrees that require a previous Commission-defined theological degree can be offered with considerable ease; degrees grouped as *Advanced Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership*, such as the DMin, fit this second category. The degrees that require more resources and raise more complex questions in their design and implementation for international delivery are those related to *Basic Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership* (like the MDiv) and *Advanced Programs Primarily Oriented Toward Theological Research and Teaching*.

## Procedures for consideration of programs

The Board of Commissioners will first review a written petition that addresses several issues regarding cultural and educational issues related to offering a program at an international site and a description of the program in terms of the relevant Standards of Accreditation. Following its review of the written petition, the Board may use a variety of methods to evaluate it, typically including authorization of a site evaluation if at least half of a degree can be completed at that site.

## Content of proposals

1. **Cultural issues.** The first part of the petition should include an evaluation of the program that reflects the following concerns and issues.
  - a. The North American institution should first engage in some cultural analysis of the appropriateness of the educational goals and objectives of the program it proposes to offer for the cultural context in which it is proposing to offer the program. *What do these educational goals mean in the culture of students who will be studying for the degree?*
  - b. The North American institution, in collaboration with a national constituency in the country in which the program is to be offered, should evaluate the cultural capacity of the North American institution to offer the program in contextually and culturally appropriate ways. *Does this institution have the skill and capacity to function transculturally?*
  - c. Programs should, in all cases, be offered in collaboration with a constituency in the country in which the program will be conducted. *Is the institution responding to a legitimate invitation from the nation in which the program of study will be offered?*
  - d. The North American institution should, in collaboration with its international constituency, carefully evaluate the impact of offering a North American degree program on the educational efforts of other, indigenous, theological education institutions. *Will the financial resources or possible prestige of a North American graduate program negatively affect the ecology of theological education in the country receiving the program? Will the national/North American partnership unduly hurt programs of national institutions that do not have North American partnerships?*

- e. If the program is truly collaborative, the North American institution should be able to identify the ways in which it will be changed as a function of offering a program collaboratively with a constituency outside North America. *How does the institution anticipate that it will be changed as a function of its partnership and the offering of an educational program internationally? Integrity in the partnership influences the flow of funds and patterns of financial support for the international program. Will the North American institution derive income from the international program, or will it be a financial contributor to the program as offered internationally?*

**2. Educational program issues.** The petition should also give attention to the unique educational aspects of the program of instruction to be delivered outside North America.

- a. North American institutions have two primary options with regard to international theological education. One is to support a partner institution in the offering of a non-North American degree—a degree that conforms to the educational conventions of the country in which the program is offered. In this case, the Board of Commissioners has limited approval responsibilities. Another option is to offer North American degrees internationally to non-North American citizens. In this case, the North American institution should have a clear justification for offering a North American degree. *What good does a North American degree contribute in a non-North American setting?*
- b. If sufficient justification exists for a North American degree to be offered internationally, then the school should be able to identify the practices and policies that will ensure the degree is, in fact, a truly North American degree. *While contextually appropriate, how does the institution deal with language, culture, and institutional resources so that these students truly have the benefits of a North American degree, whatever those benefits may be?*
- c. The school, with the help of its international constituency, should be able to demonstrate the support of other theological education institutions in the country in which the program will be offered.
- d. The institution should attend to the way in which the ethos of the institution is present in an educational program offered internationally. *How is the unique character and ethos of a particular Commission member school evident in the program it offers internationally?*
- e. The institution should be able to demonstrate that the educational goals and objectives of the instructional program are being achieved. *How will educational effectiveness be determined?*
- f. The institution should demonstrate that it has the necessary and appropriate authorization to operate the proposed international site.

**3. Description of the program in terms of the Standards of Accreditation.** The proposal should address all areas of the Standards that are appropriate to the program of instruction being proposed. Typically, these will include

- a. attention to Standard ES, section ES.3, on extension education, especially section ES.3.1.5.1; and
- b. the Degree Program Standard for each degree to which credits from the international program of instruction will be credited.

### **Site evaluation visits of locations outside North America**

1. The Board of Commissioners will require a site evaluation at the location at which the program of instruction will be conducted if as much as 50 percent of the credits required for a Board-approved degree will be offered. As appropriate, the Board of Commissioners may invite a representative of a duly recognized quality assurance agency in the region of the proposed program of instruction to participate as a member of the evaluation committee.
2. The Commission-accredited institution is responsible for reimbursing the Board of Commissioners for all costs incurred in conducting the site evaluation visit, including travel, meals, lodging, immunizations required for travel, and the Board assessment fee.