



Guidelines Regarding Combined Undergraduate–Graduate Programs

The Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (“Commission”) is historically and primarily concerned with the quality and integrity of postbaccalaureate theological education. From time to time, ATS member schools inquire as to possibilities for combined/accelerated bachelor and master’s degree programs (such as 3+3 or 3+2 programs), as a way to better serve their communities and their ecclesial partners. Such programs might be proposed by schools embedded in institutions (e.g., a university that includes both a graduate program and an undergraduate program in religion or theology) or might emerge as a partnership between a freestanding seminary and one or more colleges. While the Commission has no authority over undergraduate programs themselves, the following observations, grounded in the Commission Standards of Accreditation, may help guide schools considering such programs.

Admissions

In certain cases, students may begin a graduate program prior to completing the undergraduate degree. These cases are described within the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards*, and vary by type of degree. *Educational equivalency* applies when a prospective student has engaged in postsecondary education comparable to that of a baccalaureate degree (*Educational Standard*, section ES.7.1.2). If a school allows educational equivalency, it should be prepared to demonstrate that it adequately assesses that a student’s formal education is comparable to that of a baccalaureate degree (ES.7.1.2). *Exemptions* to the baccalaureate degree are allowed within the MDiv (Standard A) and other professional masters programs (Standard B), where as many as 15 percent of students (by head count) may be admitted without the baccalaureate or equivalent (A.4.2 and B.4.2). The ATS Board of Commissioners (“Board”) interprets this to mean that, if a student later receives a bachelor’s degree (as may be the case in an accelerated/combined program), that student no longer counts against the 15 percent. There is no similar exemption for music degrees (Standard C) or academic master’s degrees (Standard D).

Just as possession of an undergraduate degree is not the sole criterion for admission to a traditional master’s degree program, schools are reminded that they need to have clear admissions expectations for accelerated/combined programs as well. For example, in admissions for the Master of Divinity, this includes “evidence of the commitment and qualities desired for pastoral leadership, and the academic ability to engage in graduate education” (A.4.1). Similarly, the *Educational Standard* notes that persons admitted without a baccalaureate degree should have the knowledge, academic skill, and ability necessary for postbaccalaureate studies, and that “admission of such applicants should be restricted to persons with life experience that has prepared them for theological study at the graduate level” (ES.7.1.4).

Schools should be prepared to demonstrate that the process and criteria for evaluating readiness for graduate study are educationally appropriate and rigorous. Schools are also reminded that the process of admission to the graduate portion of a combined/articulated program should not simply be left to the discretion of the undergraduate college or university (Standard 6, section 6.2).

Shared credit

Some notion of shared credit often forms the backbone of combined/accelerated degree programs. The Board has no jurisdiction over whether schools choose to count graduate work toward an undergraduate degree (schools are reminded, however, that they should confer with other accrediting agencies or relevant bodies regarding requirements for undergraduate programs). The Board has historically and consistently interpreted the Standards as not allowing undergraduate work to count toward master's degrees, except in two situations:

The first falls under the category of *advanced standing for credit* (ES.7.4), which states that as many as one-fourth of the total credits for a degree may be granted based on prior work, including prior undergraduate work. Undergraduate work may not be counted simply by transfer of credit (as this applies only to graduate credit). Rather, schools must determine that "students have the knowledge, competence, or skills that would normally be provided by the specific courses for which they have been admitted with advanced standing" (ES.7.4.2). Advanced standing needs to be determined through appropriate and robust forms of assessment and cannot be granted solely on the basis of ministerial or life experience.

The second applies only to academic MA programs (not to the MDiv or professional MA), and relates to students with prior *extensive undergraduate studies* in religion and/or other appropriate areas. Such students may be allowed to complete a program in one year of course work (rather than two), in addition to the thesis or concluding exercise (D.3.2.1). Again, a student's readiness should be determined through appropriate and robust forms of assessment.

Formation and learning community

Schools are reminded that graduate theological education is understood by the Commission as more than just an accumulation of courses or individual work. For example, the expectations for the Master of Divinity degree include that students should be engaged in a community of learning with significant opportunities for interaction with faculty, peer learning, development of pastoral skills, supervised experiences, and growth in personal spiritual formation (A.3.1.1). Thus, in the design of an articulated/combined program, it would be important to look not only at a schedule of courses or the tabulation of credits but to also articulate and demonstrate how students are engaging issues such as formation and learning community in ways that are appropriate to the school's own mission and context (see, for example, ES.1.1.2, A.2.4, and B.2.4).

Reading the Standards holistically

While this document highlights a few Commission Standards that may be particularly relevant for schools considering articulated/combined programs, it is also important to remember that the Standards should be read and engaged as a whole. Schools considering a new program (of any sort) should reflect on it in light of all the Standards—including such themes as library resources, faculty workload, finances, assessment, and so on, all in light of a school's own mission and context. Schools may also petition the Board of Commissioners for approval of experiments and exceptions to the Standards in the case of programs that embody an educational design that ensures high standards of quality, congruence with the educational mission of the school, and coherence with the educational values and outcomes of theological education (ES.1.6.1). In all cases, schools that are developing new programs are encouraged to consult with their ATS Commission staff liaison for further conversation and assistance.