

PREFACE TO THE STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION

Standards of Accreditation

Theological schools accredited by the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (the “Commission”) are special-purpose institutions of postbaccalaureate, higher education. Prior to meeting the Standards of Accreditation, these schools must demonstrate that they are qualified for membership in the Commission by virtue of membership in The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (the “Association”) and by virtue of offering graduate theological degrees, functioning within the Christian or Jewish faiths, and demonstrating that their graduates serve in positions of religious leadership. The purpose of the Association is the improvement of theological schools, which is implemented through accreditation by the Commission and by the programs and services the Association provides to member schools.

Since 1938, The ATS Commission on Accrediting has maintained Standards for the accreditation of member schools. The Standards both define minimal requirements for accreditation and identify qualities associated with good institutional and educational practice; as such, they articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the theological school community regarding normative institutional performance. The Standards have been periodically reviewed and revised since their inception: the *General Institutional Standards* were approved by the membership after a comprehensive redevelopment process undertaken from 2008 through 2010, and the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards* were approved by the membership after a comprehensive revision process undertaken from 2010 through 2012.

These Standards are the basis by which schools are evaluated for Accredited Member status with the Commission. More than previous editions of Commission Standards, the current Standards seek to describe excellence in theological education in the context of the different purposes and constituencies of accredited schools. They provide the basis for ongoing institutional and educational improvement as well as descriptions of minimal expectations. The *General Institutional Standards*, *Educational Standard*, and *Degree Program Standards* comprise the Standards of Accreditation. Within them, the term “shall” is used to denote minimal expectations of accredited schools. Words such as “should” are used to identify characteristics of good practice and educational quality and to set forth expectations for improvement of theological education.

The Standards are implemented according to the procedures and policies contained herein and are interpreted and administered by the Board of Commissioners (the “Board”).

General Institutional Standards

Theological schools accredited by the Commission are different in size, structure, constituencies, patterns of governance, and diversity of degree programs. The *General Institutional Standards* apply across the range of diverse schools, even though they may be interpreted in slightly varying ways in different schools.

The *General Institutional Standards* focus on issues that are true for all theological schools regardless of the educational programs they offer: purpose, planning, and evaluation; institutional integrity; theological curriculum; library and information resources; faculty; student recruitment, admission, services, and placement; authority and governance; and institutional resources. These Standards set forth the expectation that the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards* will be applied on the foundation of a sound institutional context.

Educational Standard and Degree Program Standards

The ATS Commission on Accrediting identifies its expectations and requirements for the degrees offered by member schools in the *Educational Standard* and *Degree Program Standards*. These Standards for degree programs are intended to ensure a common understanding of the kind and quantity of academic work involved in a degree program undertaken at member schools, and to provide common public meaning for a degree, regardless of the member school that grants it.

The *Educational Standard* (ES 1 through ES 8) identifies general educational qualities that transcend particular degree program expectations. It describes four primary patterns of theological education delivery—campus-based education, extension education, distance education, and individualized instruction. It also describes expectations related to assessing learning outcomes and educational effectiveness as well as technical issues related to practices such as transfer of credits and credits shared by more than one degree. Standard ES brings together material that was formerly part of Standard DS, Standard 10, and Standard M.

The *Degree Program Standards* (A through J) fall into four categories: Basic Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership, Basic Programs Oriented Toward General Theological Studies, Advanced Programs Oriented Toward Ministerial Leadership, and Advanced Programs Primarily Oriented Toward Theological Research and Teaching. For each degree, the Standards address (1) purpose, goals, learning outcomes, and educational assessment; (2) program content; (3) educational resources and learning strategies; and (4) admission.

While the *Degree Program Standards* are intended to ensure a common, public meaning for degrees granted by theological schools that are accredited by the Board of Commissioners, a member institution should implement its degree programs in ways that meet the Standards *and* reflect the school's values and purpose. Thus, while the Standards require schools to offer programs that provide opportunities through which students may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness, each school must determine the kind of opportunities that are appropriate to its institutional and religious commitments, as well as the characteristics that are reasonable indicators of moral integrity or personal faith, in the context of the school's institutional and theological commitments. The Standards require institutions to assess the degree to which the goals of a degree program have been achieved, but schools must identify the qualities by which the attainment of goals will be assessed.

Because accreditation is somewhat distinctive in North American higher education, applicants for admission who have completed their prerequisite educational work outside North America will typically not present degrees from “accredited” schools, and the patterns of their previous education may be different from familiar patterns of education in North America. Commission member institutions are responsible for determining, for all applicants, the level of work that has been completed and whether the work represents the educational equivalent of specified, prerequisite degrees.

When a school offers more than one degree program, it is important that each program be designed in a way that ensures its educational integrity. While some courses in a degree program may also be used to satisfy requirements for another degree, in most approved degree programs there will be some courses that are offered only for that program. In schools that offer both master’s-level and doctoral-level programs, courses should be appropriate for each level and generally offered for students at only one level, with exceptions made only in clearly defined cases. Moreover, in each degree program a sufficient number of students should be enrolled to ensure an appropriate community of learners focused on the purpose and goals of that degree.