

Ten things for consideration in the next accrediting standards: learnings from the Educational Models and Practices project

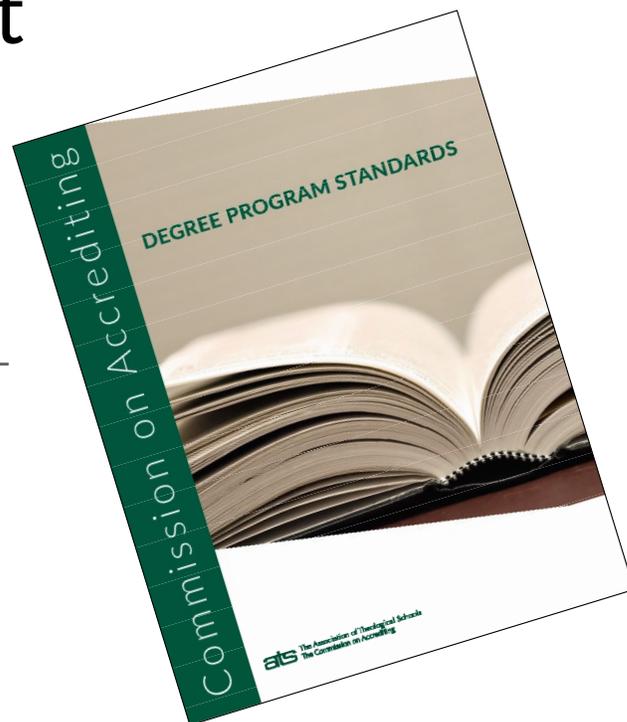
BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

The ATS Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project hosted a peer group forum in April 2017. More than 200 theological educators from 110 schools representing the project's 18 peer groups gathered to discuss their work over the preceding months and to think about what still must be done.

Peer groups engaged in continuing conversation within their own groups as well as inter-group dialogue, with nearly 20 assigned conversations between groups that shared clear affinities and those with obvious differences. For instance, one session paired the "Formation in Online Contexts" group in conversation with the "Residential Theological Education" group. Another brought together the "Roman Catholic Formation of Laity" group and the "Programs for Latino/a Students" group. Another matched "Competency-based Education" with "Global Partnerships."

The intent of these combined conversations was to identify key differences and challenge one another, to identify shared values, and to spark new ideas. A review of the notes from all of these conversations revealed some recurring themes.

Ten of the themes that emerged have potential implications for the redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation:



1 The Standards should emphasize educational outcomes across all programs. There is widespread agreement that the Standards of Accreditation should focus emphasis on quality theological education, regardless of format, delivery system, location, or educational model.

2 Some numbers in the Standards seem arbitrary. Two examples include the "15% rule" and the number of contact hours required for "hybrid" courses to count as residential. (Standard A.4.2. states that "As many as 15 percent of the students in the MDiv degree program may be admitted without possession of the baccalaureate degree or its educational equivalent." Standard ES.4.2.19 states that "The credits awarded for a hybrid or blended distance education course will count toward residency for those degrees that require residential instruc-

tion only if the majority of instructor-directed learning occurs in situations where both faculty and students are in person on the school's main campus or at an extension approved for the school to offer the full degree.”)

3 **A number of issues related to faculty work and roles will need to be addressed.** For instance, what, exactly, constitutes “regular and substantive” interaction between faculty and students? What should the Standards say about other “educators” who serve students in addition to regular faculty, such as adjunct faculty, mentors, spiritual directors, and volunteers who bring a range of skills and expertise to the enterprise?

4 **ATS might consider broadening its scope beyond accreditation of graduate theological degrees.** Many schools offer certificates, especially to provide credentials for particular constituencies. Should the Association enhance the credibility of these programs through accreditation? Should ATS accredit bachelor's level theological degrees? Could there be a particular degree to meet the distinctive needs of those incarcerated?

5 **Competency-based education is of great interest among member schools.** The topic sparked a lot of conversation in many of the peer groups and raised a number of questions: What are the implications of an educational model that in some forms breaks free from the standard “coin of the realm,” the credit hour? The impact of CBE on faculty roles and work is momentous.

6 **Assessment of Prior Learning is also a topic of interest to many groups.** As schools serve increasing numbers of students whose move into ministry is their second career, those whose theological education comes into the midst of ongoing service in ministry, and students whose “undergraduate” education took place in contexts other than North America, new understandings of how to assess prior learning are needed.

7 **The redeveloped Standards should encompass a broadened definition of “ministry.”** Theological schools in North America have traditionally been struc-

tured with to focus on preparing leaders for congregational ministries. Both the variety of those ministries and vocations utilizing theological studies for purposes other than service in congregations have pushed schools to expand their missions beyond those that tend to be emphasized in the Standards.

8 **Student “formation” for religious leadership has many facets that should be addressed in the redeveloped Standards.** The current Master of Divinity degree program standard emphasizes the need for intellectual, ministerial, personal, and spiritual formation of students. Schools of a variety of types and utilizing a range of educational models are working to define what formation means in *their* particular traditions and contexts to find the most effective ways to form students, and to demonstrate effectiveness in formation. A number of participants also noted the need for faculty appropriately trained and equipped to facilitate student formation.

9 **ATS should continue exploration of the concept of “stackable credentials.”** Such programs award credentials that give students a number of entry points as well as markers of completion. For example, a certificate program provides a foundation upon which, with additional work, a student could earn a Master of Arts degree. A next step for some students could be a Master of Divinity degree. The design of the programs avoids duplication or loss of work as the student moves to the next level of credential.

10 **Some traditional models remain highly effective.** In the midst of all the innovative thinking and work, a few groups emphasized the importance of continuing to recognize the effectiveness of traditional models. The Standards should encompass and affirm additional educationally effective models, but not at the expense of those of longer standing and proven effectiveness.

These themes were presented at a June 1 meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Commission on Accrediting. According to Harry Gardner, chair of that board, “This

important work over the past three years is now culminating in findings that will inform the next iteration of the accrediting standards. Along the way, we have gathered data, best practices, and the collective wisdom of participating schools, representing more than 90 percent of the ATS membership.”

The 18 peer groups will complete their work with final reports due in October. The reports and summary analyses will be made available on the ATS website.



[Stephen R. Graham](#) is Senior Director of Programs and Services at The Association of Theological Schools.

The EMP project continues to gather wisdom from across the broad spectrum of **274** ATS member schools, as indicated by the participation in various components of the project:

225 schools responded to the deans' survey

200 schools responded to the program directors' survey

103 schools sent representatives to participate in peer groups

102 schools applied for innovation and faculty development grants

79 schools are working on grant-funded projects

42 schools were represented by graduates participating in the workplace survey