

# Culture shift present in redeveloped standards

BY FRANK M. YAMADA

*At the last specially called meeting of the Board of Commissioners, board members looked at drafts of the redeveloped Commission Standards and the proposed Policies and Procedures before they were made public December 2, 2019. At that meeting, Board of Commissioners Chair Leanne Van Dyk said that these standards represented a culture shift. She captured a theme that the 19-member Redevelopment Task Force has noticed throughout this two-year process.*

Scholars often evoke the image of an iceberg when describing culture. The gist of this metaphor is that what one sees of an iceberg is only part of what lies beneath the surface. If we apply this metaphor to a culture shift underlying this first draft of the standards, one could say that—on the surface—the changes are obvious. They are dramatically shorter, from 98 pages to 18 pages. This is a significant change. However, the length of the standards only tells part of the story of the larger formations and currents moving under the water.

These shifts within the standards reflect the changes in theological education that are present in the more than 250 schools represented in the Commission on Accrediting. Throughout the redevelopment process, the task force has been listening to the schools. The past year was a year of listening, in which more than 50 focus groups and subcommittees, representing more than 700 participants, were convened to hear from schools what should go into the standards. Moreover, the listening extends



further. Through the Educational Models and Practices project, which began in 2015, more than 90% of the schools were engaged through surveys, convened meetings, and working groups. The data and findings from this project provided an extensive list of the current educational practices present within the membership. All these data and feedback informed the current draft. Thus, the culture shift—represented in the first draft of the standards—emerges from the larger currents of change present within the member schools.

There are at least five ways to describe this culture shift.

**1** The current draft of the standards **does not assume a “normal” model of educational practice or type of school.** For example, the assumed model of a school in the former standards was that of a free-standing institution. Schools were required to articulate how they carried out their educational missions against this norm. The preamble in the current draft captures well the shift: “These standards attend to the reality that a majority of member schools are in significant relationships with other partners, whether a university/college, a denomination/ecclisial body, another ATS school, a consortium of schools, or some other model.”

**2** These standards focus less on *specific practices* and more on *principles of quality*. For example, rather than having an educational standard that relates to the specifics of distance education, these new standards articulate agreed upon principles of what makes for quality education in both online education and residential face-to-face instruction.

**3** Rather than specific numbers or “bright lines” of accountability, the current draft emphasizes *contextual quality*. Thus, instead of an arbitrary number, such as a 15% limit for students who do not possess a Bachelor of Arts degree, schools will instead need to demonstrate students’ preparedness to engage the academic rigor involved in a graduate-level degree given a school’s particular mission and context.

**4** Related to the previous shift mentioned in #3, the new standards have the potential to *generate more meaningful conversations about what matters most in theological education*. Member schools often describe the strength of ATS accreditation through its aspirational character. That is, schools articulate who they are, how they propose to achieve quality, and then demonstrate how they have achieved it. This approach to quality improvement is not a simple compliance checklist. By focusing on principles of quality rather than quotas, the schools have an opportunity to have more dynamic conversations with visiting peers about how educational quality is achieved in areas that matter most to theological schools.

**5** One of the areas of importance that schools named throughout the redevelopment process is *student learning*

*and formation*. This emphasis may be one of the defining characteristics of theological education. Student formation is a central focus in the current draft (see Standard 3). A student’s intellectual, spiritual, human, and/or vocational formation is what theological schools do best. One of the governing questions that informed past revisions of the standards was “What makes for a good theological school?” Perhaps the important question for twenty-first century theological education is “What makes for a well-formed student?”

These five examples of a cultural shift, represented in the current draft of the standards, demonstrate a deep commitment to *quality* in theological education even as they reflect the broad diversity of ways that ATS schools seek to embody that quality. They provide *flexibility* for schools to work out that quality in ways that respond to the changing landscape of religion and higher education. At the same time, the focus on contextual quality holds schools to a higher order of accountability that is not easily captured in a checklist of compliance. Finally, this first draft embodies a value that was weaved throughout their articulation, elegant *simplicity*. Early feedback has pointed out that these new standards are not only dramatically shorter, but they are clear and well written, flowing very naturally from one principle to the next. They are simple but not simplistic.

Quality, simplicity/clarity, and flexibility—these three themes are what the schools desired in the new standards. They are captured “on the surface”—or tip of the iceberg—elegantly in 18 pages, and they are reflected in these “deeper structures and currents” sitting below the surface of the changes reflected among ATS schools.



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