

Envisioning 2020—the next two years may be momentous: a proposed work plan and timeline for redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures

BY TOM TANNER

The next two years (2018–2020) could be among the most momentous in the 100-year history of ATS. As described in the [March 2018 issue](#), the ATS Board of Commissioners is proposing a comprehensive redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures—the first one in nearly a quarter century. The membership will be asked to authorize that work at the June 2018 Centennial Biennial Meeting in Denver. The April 2018 issue focused on [five reasons](#) and [key questions](#) regarding a redevelopment.

If the authorizing motion is approved in June 2018, a 19-member, Board-appointed task force (see [accompanying article](#) in this same issue that lists the task force members) will lead the redevelopment process. This task force broadly represents the membership, especially in areas related to race and ethnicity, gender, ecclesial family, and the Association's binational nature, with attention to other important factors like school size and structure (freestanding and embedded). The redevelopment process will also involve key constituencies such as trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students, ministry practitioners, and other ecclesial partners. Some of those have already been asked to serve on the task force, while others will be consulted as needed during the process.



The proposed two-year timeline (on the following page) includes multiple opportunities for membership input. While called a “comprehensive redevelopment,” the Board does not envision this as a “tearing-down- and-rebuilding-from-scratch” process. The Board believes there is much in the current Standards (especially the opening paragraphs in most standards) that constitutes—to continue the metaphor—a solid building that should remain essentially intact.

The redevelopment process is viewed as an opportunity to have serious conversations about how we might collectively strengthen our “foundation” (core values and assumptions about accreditation and theological education) and focus on our “supporting walls” (key educational principles) while possibly eliminating “non-supporting walls” (reducing/combining some standards) and removing some of “the furniture” (details about individual practices). The goal would be to provide “a strong structure with a few furnishings” that gives schools freedom to “decorate their own rooms”

(e.g., various educational models and practices) as they see fit. The result would be fewer rules and regulations, but strong framing principles that “promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.”

As noted in earlier articles, the ATS Board of Commissioners and Commission staff have been engaged in regular and substantive review of the current Standards and Procedures for several years, including involvement with the Educational Models and Practices Project that engaged more than 90 percent of ATS member schools. So the work of redevelopment is not starting from scratch in June 2018 but rather is building upon a significant amount of information, research, and member input. With this prior work in mind, the ATS Board of Commissioners has approved in principle the following two-year (2018–2020) timeline, subject to revision by the Board as the redevelopment process unfolds. These two years may be viewed in two phases.

Phase One: Year of listening, researching, and reflecting

2018 June—Membership authorizes redevelopment of the Standards and Procedures.

2018 Summer/Fall—Board-appointed task force meets several times to organize its work, including appointing subcommittees as needed and participating in ATS and ATS-related events for ongoing membership input (throughout 2018–2019).

2019 Spring—Task force and subcommittees meet several times to continue conversations. In February, Board of Commissioners reviews first formal progress report from task force and discusses emerging issues; Board reviews second progress report from task force in June.

Phase Two: Year of writing, revising, and recommending

2019 Summer/Fall—Commission staff (working with task force members) prepare initial internal draft of new Standards and Procedures for task force review and revisions. *Task force submits first public draft of new Standards and Procedures (or sections thereof) to Board and membership for initial feedback by December 2019.*

2020 Spring—Task force continues its work. In February, Board of Commissioners reviews second full draft of Standards and Procedures from task force, revising as needed, and *submits second public draft to membership for feedback by March 2020*. Task force reviews feedback from membership on this draft and makes additional revisions as needed.

2020 April—In a special meeting, Board of Commissioners reviews final draft and distributes to the membership the final recommended Standards and Procedures—at least 45 days prior to June 2020 Biennial (per *Commission Bylaws*, 2.6).

May 2020—ATS staff host regional meetings and videoconferences to discuss new Standards and Procedures with the membership.

2020 June—ATS membership votes on adopting new Standards and Procedures.

2020–2022—Grandfathering: most likely, schools with accrediting visits up through spring 2022 may base their self-study reports on the new Standards and Procedures; schools with visits in fall 2022 or later must do so.

As noted, this two-year timeline is tentative and subject to adjustment by the ATS Board of Commissioners. The goal is an appropriate balance between urgency and patience: *urgency* because that is what we have heard from many in the membership, and *patience* because the process needs to be broadly deliberative with widespread participation. If this comprehensive redevelopment is anything like the last one, it may last us the next quarter century. The next two years may indeed be among the most momentous in our history.

For more history, explore the original ATS Standards from 1938 on the following page.



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80 years ago . . . the original 1938 ATS Standards

As ATS celebrates its 100th birthday this year, it seems timely to go back in time to the very first set of accrediting standards. The original nine standards (reprinted here) were first published in 1936, but not implemented until 1938. Those 1938 standards comprised 610 words on one page, compared to today's standards of 29,214 words on 106 pages.

From 1938 to the 1960s, schools that achieved initial accreditation did so by completing a series of "schedules" (think ATS Annual Report Forms) and by hosting one ATS staff person for a day, who "checked off" whether a school met each standard. Back then, ATS accreditation was essentially "for life," with no self-study reports, no peer evaluation visits, and no periodic reaffirmations of accreditation. It was "one and done." Things certainly have changed.

For those who would like to explore more of this history, please see the article by Tom Tanner in the June 2018 issue of *Theological Education*, "Accreditation Standards: A Look Back and a Look Around."

1. Standards of Admission. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should require for admission to candidacy for its degrees the degree of A.B. from a college which is approved by one of the regional accrediting bodies, or the equivalent of such a degree.

2. Length of Course and Standards for Graduation. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should offer a course leading to the degree of B.D. [later MDiv] or its equivalent. This should be regarded as a professional degree the standards of which in intellectual attainment are those usually required in any other field of graduate professional study. Normally it will require three years of two semesters each, or their equivalent,

beyond the A.B. degree, or its equivalent, to complete this course. It is undesirable for a seminary that is not an integral part of a university to grant the Ph.D. or the A.M. degree, but it is legitimate for a seminary affiliated with a university to offer a program leading to the Ph.D. or the A.M. degree in cooperation with a university, the degree to be given by the university. No work done towards the first college degree should be used towards a seminary degree.

3. Fields of Study and Balance of Curriculum.

An accredited Theological Seminary or College should have a curriculum predicated upon a broad and sound basis in the arts and sciences and should include adequate instruction in the following four areas: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Practical. The last should include homiletics, religious education, pastoral theology, liturgics, church administration, and the application of Christianity to modern social conditions.

4. Faculty. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should provide adequate instruction in the four fields of study indicated above and should include at least four full-time professors whose instruction shall be distributed over the four areas. In addition to the necessary moral and religious qualifications, competence as a scholar and a teacher (rather than the possession of degrees) should in all cases be considered the essential characteristics of an acceptable member of a faculty. Such professors together with the administrative officer or officers shall constitute a faculty with effective control over its curriculum and the granting of degrees. A weekly teaching load of more than twelve hours per instructor shall be considered as endangering educational efficiency.

5. Library. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should have a library which is live, adequate, well distributed and professionally administered, with collections bearing especially upon the subjects taught and with a definite annual appropriation for the purchase of new books and the appropriate contemporary periodicals.

6. Equipment. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should have such equipment in lands, buildings and libraries as shall provide adequate facilities for the carrying out of the program of the institutions.

7. Finances. An accredited Theological Seminary or College should have sufficient income from endowment or reliable general gifts or fees to support fully the program which the institution offers, including an adequate support for its staff, its library, and the maintenance of its equipment.

8. General Tone. In accrediting a Theological Seminary or College regard should be had for the quality of its instruction, the standing of its professors, the character of its administration, the efficiency of its offices of record and its proved ability to prepare students for efficient professional service or further scholarly pursuits.

9. Inspection. A Theological Seminary or College desiring accreditation shall upon request be inspected and reported by an agent of the Accrediting Commission of this Conference. Only institutions thus inspected and approved by the Commission shall be accredited. The Accrediting Commission shall review periodically the list of accredited institutions and make recommendations for the revision of the list.