

A premise, a promise, and a prayer: update on redeveloped *Standards*

BY TOM TANNER

This is the twenty-fourth Colloquy Online article over the last two years that provides an update on redeveloping the ATS Standards and Policies and Procedures. This update, however, is unlike any other because of the challenging times in which we find ourselves. We realize that reading about accreditation proposals is not anyone's priority right now. Yet, this is an opportune time to think about the importance of theological education and how standards can reflect the best of what we do and who we are.

The importance of our work together, even in such a time as this, was underscored by an insight offered during the last of our six regional feedback sessions. It was at the beginning of March, which seems like ages ago in this era of COVID-19. The comment came, ironically, from an ATS member in Seattle—one of the first areas in North America to be hit with this pandemic. He offered this reflection: “The new standards are focused not on a fearful future but on a preferred future. They speak to what is best about theological education.”

That single statement encapsulates in many ways what the Redevelopment Task Force has been seeking to do for the last two years. It represents many of the nearly 400 comments collected by the task force after the second drafts were released on February 10. Since then, the task force has hosted six regional feedback sessions for nearly 150 people, presented two webinars attended

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by 200 people, and heard from another 50 people via surveys, emails, and Engage ATS posts. Member feedback on the overall standards has been almost unanimously affirming, with lots of suggestions, as well as comments like: “thanks for a truly helpful and hopeful set of standards,” “this is a huge step forward in theological education,” and “the task force has done an outstanding job of listening to the membership.” That last quote is the reason for this article’s headline: “A premise, a promise, and a prayer.”

A premise

Our premise from the beginning has been that the standards belong to the membership. They do not belong to the task force, the Board of Commissioners, nor the ATS staff. These are your standards. That is why the task force spent the first year listening to the membership, engaging more than 700 members from 200 schools in scores of meetings, resulting in more than 1,100 member comments. We listened to as many people as we could—trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students, church leaders, and others—before we wrote a single word in the proposed standards.

A promise

Our promise has been that we would keep listening throughout this two-year process. Since the first public drafts were released on December 2—during the second year of writing and revising—the task force has collected more than 500 comments from ATS members:

around 120 on the first drafts and nearly 400 on the second drafts. The 120 comments on the first drafts led to more than 100 revisions in the second drafts. The nearly 400 comments on the second drafts are now being processed by the task force, with the third drafts likely to reflect many more revisions. The encouraging news throughout the revision process is that almost no one has raised any major concerns. Most comments focus on very specific issues (like reduced credit options in *Standard 3.13*) or very general issues (like how to interpret and implement principle-based standards). The issues raised will be addressed in the third public drafts, scheduled to be released no later than May 8—more than 45 days before the June 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting.

A prayer

Our prayer relates to the Biennial Meeting, the details of which are still being worked out in this new era of limited travel. Wherever and however the membership votes in June 2020, we pray that they will see these new standards as “speak[ing] to what is best about theological education.” Only once a generation does the membership do this kind of redevelopment, and we want to get it right for the next generation. We want “standards focused not on a fearful future but on a preferred future.” That is our prayer.



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