

Redevelopment Task Force has done its work—yours is just beginning

BY SARAH DRUMMOND

Editor's note: Prior to making the motion to adopt the new Standards and Policies during the 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting, Sarah Drummond gave the following address. Sarah chaired the task force that led the 2018–2020 redevelopment process. She serves as founding dean for Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School.

Thank you, Executive Director Frank Yamada and ATS Board of Commissioners' Chair Leanne Van Dyk for this opportunity to say a few words on this eve of a vote. Preparation for the vote in question has been a big part of many people's lives, including my own. Members of The Association of Theological Schools will vote on newly redeveloped standards by which we'll maintain and enhance the quality of theological education in our respective institutions. In these minutes preceding a formal motion, I'll describe what the redevelopment process was and was not, what it involved, and then I'll reflect on two of many leadership lessons I'll take with me as the redevelopment process comes to a close.

What the redevelopment process was and was not

First, what the process leading up to this vote was and was not: it was a once-in-a-generation event. The membership revises and updates standards regularly, but the last time the *Standards* were fundamentally rebuilt was 25 years ago. The redeveloped *Standards* you've seen and have been studying and critiquing for the past several months, are no revision. At the same time, the task force didn't start from scratch. We embraced the metaphor of rehabbing a house, where the footprint stayed the same, as well as the supporting walls, but virtually everything else was cleared away or rebuilt.



Second, what the process involved: A lot. The redevelopment process began six years ago with the Educational Models and Practices Project. That project, which included the vast majority of the membership in some way, was a deep dive into what was happening at our member schools to educate theological thinkers and religious leaders. The new knowledge, both captured and created through the Educational Models Project, provided perhaps the clearest picture ever of the incredible range of practices through which studies in theology and religion and ministry were coming to life in our varied settings.

What the redevelopment process involved

Toward the end of that project, I and several other colleagues engaged in a two-year preparatory task force, charged with preparing for a 2018 vote of the membership on whether or not, and if so how, we might go about redeveloping the *Standards*. That task force considered what it would take to integrate all that was being learned about innovation in theological education into the Association's commitments to quality control,

truth-in-advertising, and continuous improvement. We wanted rigorous standards that encouraged life-giving innovation.

The membership voted in Denver in 2018 to authorize a *redevelopment* process and to empower a mostly new task force. The Redevelopment Task Force, the finest company in which I've ever taken part, dedicated its first year to listening, and all the active, research-oriented practices that capture listening and turn it into learning. The task force expanded during the first year to include subcommittees that involved those with greatest expertise in specific areas of the *Standards*. The second year involved a similarly rigorous and interactive phase of writing, where the task force exchanged ideas, and then we—through drafts, and regional and online focus groups—exchanged even more ideas with you, resulting in the document on which we will soon cast our votes.

Two leadership lessons from the redevelopment process

Many leadership lessons emerged during the redevelopment process. I'll focus on two. The first is this: sometimes the most radical change leaders can make is to choose to think differently. The membership spoke to the Redevelopment Task Force plainly, consistently, loudly, and clearly: you said the current *Standards* are too long, too prescriptive, and too one-size-fits-all in a way that privileges schools that reside within the bulwarks of cultural hegemony. The task force responded to those nearly univocal critiques not by slashing and burning, but by looking at the whole concept of standards from a different point of view. Instead of obliterating the current *Standards*, and instead of tweaking them, we elevated them to a higher level of abstraction. The membership was ready—really ready—for change, which tempted us to go with something drastic for drastic's sake. As you can see from the redeveloped *Standards*, this shift in attention did lead to a dramatic change, more subversive than meets the eye, but the change began with a change in perspective.

The second related lesson was about the importance of stressing principles over practice. In order to elevate the

current *Standards* to a higher plane of abstraction, we needed to ask the question “why” thousands of times. Here's an example of a fictional conversation that illustrates my point:

- **ME:** Schools can only admit 15% without a bachelors' degree.
- **I:** Why?
- **ME:** Because this is graduate school, and the work levels and atmosphere of professional, seasoned inquiry should reflect that.
- **I:** Okay, then why not just the latter part? Describe the hoped-for atmosphere, rather than an arbitrary percentage?
- **ME:** Because describing an atmosphere is hard.
- **I:** Is it, though? Is it really that hard? You just did it.

To move from principles to practice requires a thoughtful conversation about origin stories. Each of our schools has an internal mythology behind what we do, and why we do it that way. We teach at certain times, and in certain locations, and started doing so for reasons we sometimes forget. Occasionally, we're asked to make a change, and only then do we find out why we started doing something in the first place. Sometimes, the reason is good; other times, the reason was good a long time ago but no longer serves.

This movement from practices, to the principles that inspired the practices, is hard but cathartic work. It's cathartic because it's liberating—when we realize we're doing something we don't have to do, that was appropriate for other people or in another time, we're free to change. When our institutions don't look exactly like every other institution, especially the most powerful ones, principles give us honor and allow varied colleagues to hone in on principles we all hold dear.

During the *Standards* redevelopment process, I became obsessed with distinguishing principles from practices in

my own work as dean of a historic and now-embedded seminary. That obsession helped me respond quickly to COVID-19. The crisis that descended on our world some months ago didn't call on us simply to move classes and programs online. We needed to think about the principles behind those classes and programs and re-envision how we'd honor those principles under strange and challenging circumstances. In a way, this crisis provided an early test of our newly redeveloped *Standards*, for it demonstrated how much flexibility schools are going to need if they're to respond nimbly in a season of rapid and dramatic change.

As the redevelopment process ends, your work begins

Before you, you have newly redeveloped *ATS Standards*. I, my vice chair, Oliver McMahan, and the *Standards* Redevelopment Task Force stand by them. We believe them to be inclusive, exhaustive, and principled. We expect they will spur good conversation in our institutions about how our principles inspire our practices, and how we must renew our minds so we might respond faithfully to the cries of the aching world we serve.

If we were in a ballroom in Vancouver right now—and oh, how I wish we were—I would ask all members of the Redevelopment Task Force to rise in body or spirit. Then, I would ask those who were part of a subcommittee to do the same. Then, I would ask those who attended a focus group to rise. Then, I would ask those who filled out a survey on the *Standards* to rise. Except for the newest deans and presidents among you, I would by then imagine that all would have risen, and I'd say this:

Our task force has done its work, but yours is just beginning. The redeveloped *Standards* will call on you to state your principles—even the most tacitly understood—and align your practices with them. They will give you flexibility, but they insist you demonstrate the validity of how you're using that flexibility. They make more room for emergent models, and no room for schools with traditional models to rest on their laurels. What I can promise, based on my own experience, is that this work will not just improve your schools, it will change you. With, and only with, God's help, may it be so. Thank you.



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