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 learn-
ing. 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 redevelop-
ment process. I’ll focus on two. The first is this: some-
times 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 atten-
tion 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 illus-
trates 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 some-
thing 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 appro-
priate 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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