

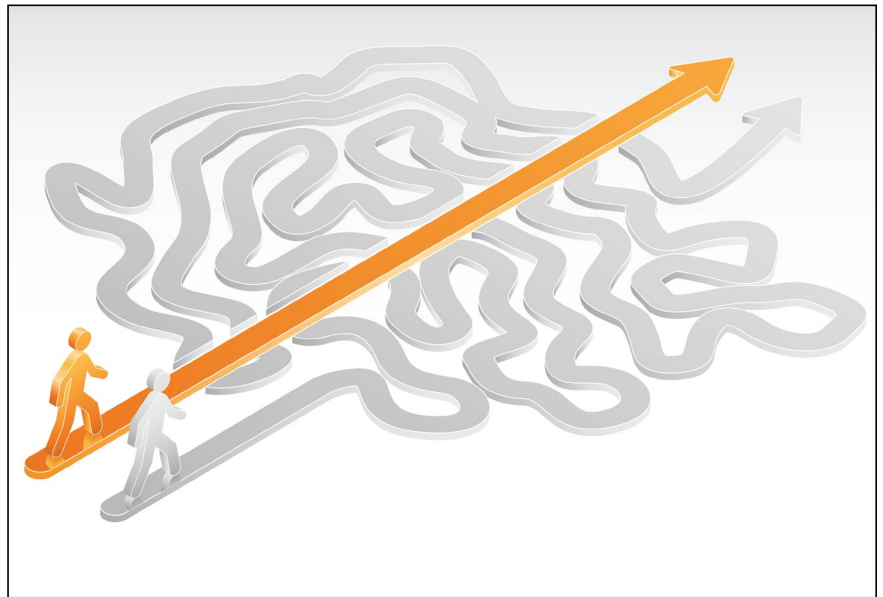
The complexity of simplicity: an update on redeveloping the standards

BY TOM TANNER

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” So reportedly said Einstein, author of the deceptively simple $E=MC^2$ formula that belies unbelievable complexity. Echoing Einstein, US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. once offered this perspective on the complexity of simplicity: “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” *True simplicity is not an easy goal, but it is a worthy one.*

“Elegant simplicity” has been a key goal guiding the 19-member task force providing leadership for the redevelopment of the ATS Commission *Standards and Policies*. “Elegant” is an admirable modifier for the kind of complicated simplicity being sought. That term is from a Latin word that can mean “carefully chosen.” Writing new standards requires careful choosing. It requires listening long and hard to the diversity and complexity of the ATS membership and the constituencies they serve. It requires research and reflection, due diligence, and difficult decisions. Elegant simplicity doesn’t come easily, nor simply.

The task force has spent this past year doing the kind of “complexity” that is required for “elegant simplicity.” The “year of listening” has been hard work, engaging more than 700 ATS participants from some 200 ATS schools in



more than 50 focus groups and a dozen subcommittees. These focus groups have added to the member wisdom already gathered from the four-year Educational Models and Practices Project, from participants at various ATS leadership education events, from the ongoing work of the Board of Commissioners, and from comments contributed via the redevelopment task force’s website, among other sources of input.

The task force has now sifted through more than a thousand member comments, coded by two external parties experienced in qualitative research. It may not be surprising to learn, given the complexities faced by our member schools, that the desire for “simplicity” surfaced more than any other theme except “quality.” To be sure, members expressed their desire for simplicity in a variety of ways with a variety of terms. They hope the new standards “are less redundant,” “have more clarity,” “streamline petition processes,” and “simplify accreditation.” They want standards that are clear, concise, and concentrated on key issues.

That said, members also expressed interest that the new standards not pursue “elegant simplicity” at the expense of “ambiguous brevity.” They want the new standards to “be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” They want the kind of simplicity that is found “on the other side of complexity”—after doing the hard work of researching and reflecting, of listening and learning from

the membership. That is the task now before the task force: to take the membership’s desire for quality and simplicity seriously by developing an “elegantly simple” set of standards (and policies) that “set the standard” for a new generation of theological education.



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