

# The "year of listening"—what did the Standards and Procedures Redevelopment Task Force learn?

BY SARAH B. DRUMMOND

*Question: What is the difference between 25 years of professional experience, and one year of professional experience 25 times?  
Answer: reflective practice.*

Having begun my work in theological education as a field education director, I appreciate how important it is to reflect upon experience, holding up new learnings in the light of faith and allowing new knowledge to change us. Theological field educators know that experience is not, itself, educative. It is the reflection on experiences—good or bad—that makes the difference.

It is for this reason that I and others felt strongly that the Standards and Procedures Redevelopment Task Force (RTF) needed to bring its year of listening to a close with some intentional reflective practice. As you will read in the accompanying piece at the end of this article, this year of listening included a wide variety of data collection and analysis activities, yet research on where the membership is now will not be enough to lead us into the future. As we turn our sights to the actual penning of redeveloped standards, we needed to let our learning sink in and then cast a vision to the horizon.

So what did we learn? Members of the RTF gathered July 24 and 25 in Chicago to discuss just that. The team reviewed findings of a comprehensive year of listening, studied data analyses, compared findings with the results of the far-reaching Educational Models and Practices Project, and examined some early draft documents for style and format. In addition, the nearly 20 who gathered



asked a deeper question: What have we ourselves learned? What surprised us, inspired us, daunted us? How has this year of listening changed and shaped each of us? Here are some of the ideas generated from that time of reflection:

**1** We were awed by the incredible diversity of theological educational contexts, and the creative approaches to teaching and forming students within and for those contexts.

**2** We were encouraged to learn that virtually no ATS members want to see standards that are inattentive to quality.

**3** We felt anxiety, in ourselves and in stakeholders engaged this year, about the challenge of assuring quality while also decentering what was previously an unspoken norm (namely, a traditional free-standing or university-affiliated mainline school).

**4** We were affirmed in our own instincts to see that most members share our view that the redeveloped standards ought to focus on educational principles and get away from micromanaging on-the-ground practices.

**5** We took seriously that our membership is crying out for clarity. We, together, committed to a shared responsibility to create standards and procedures that are brief and easily understood.

Most of all, the RTF expressed feeling inspired: inspired by the students who participated in focus-group discussions on the values that shape theological education, inspired by the wide-ranging diversity in the ATS membership, inspired by the commonalities of concerns and hopes within that diversity. As we turn our attention to writing and engaging the membership in a new way, with drafts in-hand, the RTF is all the more convinced that now is the time for change, and the change must guide us into a future where schools—however different from one another—are guided toward quality and integrity through mutual accountability.



*Sarah B. Drummond is Founding Dean at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. She chairs the task force redeveloping the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures.*

# Lessons learned from the "year of listening:" top seven themes for new *Standards and Policies*

*This past July, the Redevelopment Task Force, tucked away in a Chicago hotel, devoted two days to processing what it has learned this past year—the “year of listening”—to the ATS membership. They had before them more than 100 pages of 1,100+ comments representing some 200 ATS schools—all laboriously coded by external professionals into more than 50 categories or themes. In addition, they had all the reports and research from the four-year Educational Models and Practices Project, plus insights from the Board of Commissioners and from various other modes of membership input.*

The task force spent most of its time discussing the top seven themes—seven things that the membership has overwhelmingly said are key issues that the new *Standards and Policies* must address. These seven themes were each raised more than 50 different times by a majority of the 50 focus groups, compared to almost all other themes that were raised fewer than 20 times by a minority of those groups. Here are the top seven themes raised by the ATS membership concerning a new set of *Standards and Policies*.

## 1. Quality

The task force heard from the membership that any new set of accrediting standards or policies must focus, above all else, on quality. The nearly 100 comments coded for quality—from almost every focus group—used various terms, like “excellence,” “rigor,” and “gold standard.” How members defined quality also varied considerably. Some associated quality with residency or resources. Most,



though, defined quality in terms of alignment with and achievement of each school's mission, indicating that quality should be evaluated contextually.

## 2. Simplicity/Clarity

Almost as frequently as quality, the membership raised the issue of wanting new standards and policies that are simpler and clearer. Nearly 90 different comments from almost every focus group focused on that dual theme, desiring “less redundancy,” “greater clarity,” and a “simpler structure and style” for the new standards. The task force devoted significant time at its July meeting to this issue and is committed to writing new *Standards and Policies* that are simpler and clearer.

## 3. Modality

A close third to the first two themes was the membership's interest in “modality,” or how educational programs are delivered. The nearly 90 comments on this issue from many different focus groups addressed issues ranging from on-campus to online to offsite offerings, with a few also on competency-based education. The vast majority

of those commenting on multiple modes of delivery hoped that the new standards would not presume or privilege any one modality. Rather, the hope is that however a school chooses to deliver its degrees, the school demonstrates that its students are achieving the learning outcomes for those degrees.

## 4. Degrees

Nearly tied with the third theme was the number of members' comments on degree programs. More than 80 comments from the 50 focus groups focused on suggestions for degree program standards. Most preferred having fewer degree program categories, eliminating the distinction between academic and professional MA programs, and allowing for more flexibility in admissions to various degrees. These comments echo what the task force subcommittee on degrees has also heard.

## 5. Diversity

More than 75 comments raised the issue of diversity, addressing issues ranging from race and ethnicity to religion and gender. The task force has discussed this issue at length, guided by the significant efforts of the 12-member subcommittee on diversity. While the focus group comments offered no single perspective on diversity, three overriding sentiments emerged from the membership: (1) diversity is highly valued by ATS schools, (2) diversity is best defined by each school in its own context, and (3) each school must demonstrate how it is not only addressing diversity but enhancing it—given the increasingly diverse world in which all ATS graduates will serve.

## 6. Streamlining Accreditation

Almost 70 comments concerned the strong desire to streamline many current accreditation processes, especially those related to substantive changes and to the

self-study process. The task force is addressing this concern primarily through a major revision (and simplification) of the current *Policies and Procedures* document. The Board of Commissioners is also in the midst of a major revision of its *Policy Manual*, which will be subsumed into that new document, so all accreditation policies and procedures can be found in one place. The Board is also rewriting the *Self-Study Handbook* and updating its educational materials to better support the self-study process.

## 7. Flexibility

More than 60 comments focused on flexibility, using a variety of terms like “nimbleness” and “adaptability.” Many spoke against “overly rigid” standards, and many hoped the new standards would encourage “innovation” and “experimentation.” As with the first theme on quality, this theme on flexibility raised the importance of “contextual accountability.” Standards cannot be “one size fits all.”

These are the leading lessons learned in the “year of listening, reflecting, and researching.” They are seven key themes guiding the task force in this new “year of writing, revising, and recommending.” Please pray for the task force members as they begin this important phase.

The first public draft of a new set of *Standards and Policies* is scheduled for release on December 2, 2019, with revised drafts (based on member feedback) planned for February and May of 2020. Six regional meetings and two webinars will be held in February and March 2020 to ensure that all members have the opportunity to engage and provide input on these drafts. The membership vote is scheduled for June 24–25, 2020, at the 2020 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in Vancouver. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions, please email the task force at [redvelopment@ats.edu](mailto:redvelopment@ats.edu).