Reflections on Key Themes and Principles from ATS Peer Groups
For the Redevelopment of the ATS Standards and Procedures
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Introduction

As part of the $7 million Lilly-funded Educational Models and Practices Project, ATS convened eighteen "peer groups" between 2015 and 2017 to look at different ways member schools are doing theological education. These peer groups met collectively and individually, on multiple occasions and in various settings, to review, research, and reflect on a wide range of educational models and practices among member schools. The groups' interests included *various delivery methods* (online [2 groups], residential, university-based, and competency-based education), *different degree programs* (MDiv [2], DMin [2], permanent diaconate programs, and programs in prison), and *numerous student populations and outreach efforts* (Catholic laity, Latino/a, Asian, Black, students without baccalaureates, and global partnerships [2]). These eighteen groups raised scores of issues related to theological education, ranging from admissions and formation to quality and affordability. More than 200 participants from nearly 110 schools (40% of 270 ATS members) spent a good part of two years involved in these conversations.

One of the major goals of this project has been to "inform a substantive redevelopment of the standards of accreditation." The peer groups in this project produced final reports totaling 185 pages, providing a rich resource for the redevelopment process. Many of these reports include new research data from surveys of the membership and from the collective lessons learned by member schools involved in these educational models and practices. Given the goal described above, each peer group identified places in the current standards where their results might inform a new set of standards. Each group was also asked to identify key educational principles reflected in these many different approaches—principles that provide a framework for thinking about a major revision to the standards. Threaded throughout all these reports are themes that echo over and over.

This document attempts to summarize the findings from this two-year project in three parts: Part A reflects on key themes echoed across the various peer groups; Part B identifies quality educational principles raised by the peer groups; and Part C lists some specific concerns over current standards that the groups see as problematic for existing educational models and practices.

Part A. Key Themes

Perhaps the most dominant theme that has emerged from these peer groups is this: *ATS member schools are using effectively and well many different educational models and practices to meet their diverse missions, from tried-and-true traditional methods to increasingly innovative approaches*. This implies that no longer is any single educational model the default or de facto model among our members—no "best way" alone sufficient to address our schools' varying purposes, publics, and programs. The residential model that dominated graduate theological education for decades, while still valued and valid for many of our member schools, has not been the main model for many years. Campus-based, institution-centric approaches have given way to a multiplicity of models that are more diffuse, de-centralized, and dependent upon an increasing array of partnerships inside and outside the academy.

Other themes that emerged from these peer group reports that have implications for the redevelopment of the ATS Commission Standards and Procedures include the following:

1. *All educational models and practices seek to demonstrate educational quality, in context-specific ways.* Virtually all peer groups addressed in some way the issue of educational quality, though no group provided a one-size-fits-all-schools-in-all-contexts definition. The many different models and practices simply defy simplistic definitions of quality. For example, while discussions around formation factored prominently in two-thirds of the reports, the Formation in Online Contexts Peer Group seemed to speak for the others when it noted: "Each institution must define formation in ways that fit their missions, constituents, and particular degree programs." That said, formation must still carry some common meaning and weight for so many groups across the membership to raise it. That suggests a second theme (see below).

2. *Educational quality is better understood through broad educational principles rather than in terms of specific models or practices.* Our current standards of accreditation have evolved since 1938 from one page to more than one hundred pages, mostly by way of accretion and addition. Historically, when a new model or practice (e.g., the DMin degree or extension education or assessment), became accepted by the membership, a new standard (usually rather lengthy) was written on that specific model or practice. The sheer variety of educational approaches manifested in the various peer group reports suggests that writing a standard for every single model or practice is no longer desirable or viable. A more promising and manageable approach to developing a new set of standards might be identifying key educational principles that these peer groups surfaced in their discussions. It is those broad principles (discussed in the following section) that might collectively define (or at least describe) what ATS schools mean by "educational quality."

3. *Discussions of educational quality increasingly use language from competency-based education.* Nearly two-thirds of the eighteen peer groups used the term "competency" in some form, ranging from intercultural competency as a desired student outcome to formal CBE programs. These reports do not limit "competency" simply to a technical or practical skill, but use the term more holistically to encompass the broader goals of theological education and formation. This focus on competency as a key factor in describing quality may also explain why the group most frequently cited and engaged by another group was the one focused on competency-based theological education. That approach to education may help our member schools "begin with the end in mind" (what we want students to know, be, and do). The DMin Admissions Peer Group highlighted this teleological approach thus: "As Dan Aleshire observed in his closing address at the Educational Models and Practices Peer Group Forum in Pittsburgh on April 20, 2017: 'What makes a practice theological is its end, not its content or methodology.'"

4. *Formation, however defined, is a critical concern for most every educational model and practice.* Two-thirds of the eighteen peer groups raised the issue of formation, not just the Formation in Online Contexts Peer Group. As noted earlier, while formation may defy simple definitions, it is still held in high regard by the membership, regardless of delivery, degree, or student demographic. Since their initial implementation in 1938, our standards have tended to treat theological education primarily as a profession. As ATS enters its second century, the next set of standards may need to focus more on formation as an overarching goal of theological education.

5. *Accessibility and flexibility are twin themes that inform virtually every educational model and practice.* Only one peer group did not raise one or the other of these themes, and nearly two-thirds raised both. They are typically intertwined because one often leads to, or stems from, the other. For example, educational models focused on online delivery (discussed by many of the peer groups) provide greater access to theological education for more students because it provides the flexibility many students need, especially older, working adults—the fastest growing demographic among ATS students. And educational practices targeting underserved populations (the focus of many of the peer groups) must be flexible to provide access for an increasingly broad range of students. The

Programs in Prison Peer Group underscored these twin themes this way: "Accessibility means shifting pedagogies to adjust [flexibility] to the needs of adult learners with a wide variety of educational backgrounds." The Educational Values of Online Learning Peer Group conducted a survey of more than 140 ATS academic deans and found that four of the top five benefits of online learning dealt with accessibility and flexibility.

6. *Many different delivery methods are being used broadly and effectively by a majority of ATS schools, with many peer groups requesting that the next set of standards be "modality neutral."* This desire to no longer privilege the residential model came from many different peer groups. Even among the Residential Theological Education Peer Group, which requests that any revised standards "still reflect what residential seminaries do," half of the schools in that group also have online programs. Perhaps only a fourth of ATS schools still rely on the traditional, residential model, with the vast majority using a commuter model, an online model, or some combination thereof. Research conducted by several peer groups show no reduction in educational quality or spiritual formation for non-residential models of theological education. Results from recent ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires show that mostly online students report higher levels of spiritual formation than do traditional, residential students (see Final Report from Educational Values of Online Learning Peer Group). As noted above and below, the issue for these peer groups is not that any new set of standards should lessen the membership's focus on educational quality, but rather that all models should demonstrate quality educational principles regardless of delivery modality.

7. *Diversity is a thread that runs throughout the educational models and practices current among member schools.* While one might expect the three peer groups looking at minority populations to highlight diversity, this theme surfaced in more than half of the eighteen peer groups. As one of the Global Partnerships Peer Groups reported, "Another educational principle served by global partnerships is that diversity is good, for God created the world in its variety and pronounced it so." Diversity among the various peer groups is broadly understood, ranging from racial and ethnic diversity to issues related to ecclesiology, gender, educational backgrounds, and cultural competency. One of the key educational principles for the ATS membership was stated by the Educational Values of Online Learning Peer Group this way: "Good theological education prizes diversity."

8. *Partnerships inside and outside the academy are growing among ATS schools.* While two peer groups focused especially on global partnerships, more than half of the eighteen groups noted the growing need for and importance of partnerships for theological schools. Examples include schools in the Accelerated Bachelor's/MDiv Peer Group that partner with undergraduate programs, schools in the RC Schools Formation of Laity Peer Group that partner with bishops and parishes, the three peer groups focused on minority students that partner with their supporting communities, and schools in the Competency-Based Education Peer Group that partner with constituent churches. As noted in the Global Partnership Peer Group, "The current global climate fosters shared resources and creative solutions based upon collaborative learning in business, medicine, science, explorations, politics, advocacy, and higher education. This trend is also seen in theological circles, where theological education and discourse, missional ventures, and ministry are no longer restrained by nationalism, culture, or geography. Indeed, an explosion of individuals and institutions now train lay and professional ministers around the world, responding in ever-increasing numbers to reach across old boundaries to form partnerships to achieve similar tasks."

Part B. Quality Educational Principles

As noted above, the sheer variety of educational approaches manifested in the various peer group reports suggests that writing a standard for every single model or practice is no longer desirable or viable. A more promising and manageable approach to developing a new set of standards might be identifying quality educational principles that these peer groups surfaced in their discussions. In that regard, most every peer group suggested some educational principles that might inform a new set of standards and collectively identify what ATS means by educational quality. The most comprehensive set of principles were raised by two peer groups, as listed below.

1. Six Principles from the Educational Values of Online Learning Peer Group (with citations from current standards):

   - *Good theological education reflects common theological values.* Good theological education, regardless of model or mode, reflects "a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity" (Standard 3 Introduction).

   - *Good theological education prioritizes outcomes over inputs or methods.* Good theological education is based less on the presence of various institutional inputs or instructional methods and more on the achievement of appropriate student learning outcomes. To that end, "assessment of student learning requires schools… to demonstrate the extent to which students have achieved the various goals [or outcomes] of the[ir] degree programs" (Educational Standard [ES], Introduction).

   - *Good theological education requires a community of engagement.* Good theological education "requires regular and substantive interaction between teachers and learners and among learners" (ES.4.2.3) within "a viable community of learning" (ES.1.1.2), regardless of the model or mode used. Education related to ministerial leadership requires students to be "engaged in a community of learning whereby faculty and students have significant opportunities for interaction, peer learning, development of pastoral skills, supervised experiences of ministry, and growth in personal, spiritual formation" (Degree Program Standards A.3.1.1, B.3.1.1, and C.3.1.1).

   - *Good theological education prizes diversity.* Good theological education uses "the diversity of life experiences represented by the students, by faith communities, and by the larger cultural context." All educational models or modes are "sensitive to the diversity of student populations, different learning styles of students, the importance of communities of learning, and [appropriate degree program] goals" (3.2.2.2).

   - *Good theological education demonstrates appropriate institutional support.* Good theological education, in whatever form, manifests "careful planning [and budgeting] … to ensure adequate infrastructure, resources, training, and support" for instructors and students (3.2.2.2).

   - *Good theological education exhibits good instructional design.* Good theological education involves educational experiences that are effective, efficient, and engaging, through a process of instructional design that defines appropriate educational goals, determines learners' educational needs, and then creates learning experiences that address those goals and needs, regardless of the educational model or delivery mode employed [not found explicitly in any current Standard].

2. Six Principles from the Programs in Prison Peer Group (abbreviated from their report):

- *Theological education is transformational for everyone involved.* Many schools consider the formational process of seminary education to be the key to transformation. Most programs weave together traditional academic disciplines with personal spiritual development, leadership and social formation, as well as relationship building within cohorts—often across the divisions of race, class, denominational backgrounds, and … status. Some schools connect personal transformation to social transformation...

- *Theological education should be available and accessible to anyone who wants it.* In many cases, programs in prisons began in response to local opportunities to increase availability and accessibility to theological education. Faculty and staff realized that this principle meant much more than simply offering theological education in prisons. Availability meant pursuing financial models and fundraising that would render classes affordable... Accessibility meant shifting pedagogies to adjust to the needs of adult learners with a wide variety of educational backgrounds. Additionally, many of these classes contain students from different races, classes, religious backgrounds, and political beliefs. Many programs have come to use peer to peer education models that make use of students' prior learning and varied life experiences in the apprehension and application of theological material.

- *Theological education happens in the context of a community.* Many schools expressed that prison policies offered initial barriers to creating a community of theological learning… Yet many schools reported that in the face of these policies that work to individuate, the principle of community became even more evident as a bedrock of theological education. Each school had stories about the slow transformation of prison policies to accommodate communities of learning.

- *The theological disciplines must hear, incorporate, and learn alongside the wisdoms of marginalized people.* … schools expressed a sense that something was missing in the theological reflection of the institution when theological thinking occurred predominantly within the seminary walls. The sense that voices were missing from the conversation prompted the start of many of these programs. All participants reported that they think differently about God and ministry in some way from having engaged in these programs. Faculty report shifts in research foci and students report shifts in worldview and vocation from having participated in [these] programs.

- *Theological institutions should attend to the continuing education needs of their students, both degree and non-degree bearing students.* Most schools named that continuing education needs are different for [these] students than their traditional students. Yet each program named that this principle has pressed them to explore the fullness and limits of what they are able to offer students who graduate from these programs, including pathways to post-secondary education (AAs, BAs, or MDivs depending on the program). These programs have stretched the boundaries of what is considered "continuing education needs" in that faculty and staff have realized that if students do not have homes, work, and family stability, they will not be able to pursue their vocations and educations. Some programs are pursuing ministries and partnerships [to] help students with [their diverse] needs…

- *Theological institutions operate with integrity: offering dependable, authentic, and contextually appropriate education.* Students must be able to see how theological education makes sense in their lives and in the lives of their future parishioners. Programs in prisons have challenged theological educators to see how their own theological teachings have been contextually formed and to adjust those teachings to fit the [students'] context. Institutions must be dedicated to training faculty and staff in the skills needed to provide authentic and contextually appropriate education for [students'] environment.

3. Twelve additional principles from other peer groups (selected and abbreviated):

- *Theological education is not limited to formal education programs… and should recognize prior learning assessment and other ways to determine competency*. (Cited by many groups)

- *Theological education is essentially relational*. (Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv)

- *Theological education is integrative; cultural competency and sensitivity are central.* (Permanent Diaconate)

- *Theological education should begin with desired student outcomes and shape the institution and its resources most effectively to achieve those outcomes*. (Permanent Diaconate)

- *Theological education in global partnerships recognizes diversity as vital and strives for humble, reciprocal, and mutually-beneficial partnerships to accomplish shared goals*. (Global Partnerships)

- *The future of theological education is tied to global education*. (Global Partnerships)

- *Theological education must demonstrate educational effectiveness with the communities that represent its student body*. (Historically Black Schools)

- *Competency-based theological education is customized, communal, and contextualized… and anchored in assessment*. (Competency-Based Education)

- *Theological education requires better evaluation of students of all educational backgrounds to know that they … exhibit readiness for theological education and are likely to succeed [regardless of prior formal learning]*. (Students without Bachelor's)

- *Theological education's current degree categories (academic and professional) may no longer be adequate and appropriate* (Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv and University Divinity Schools)

- *Theological education should allow for the stackability of degrees and provide a framework to recognize lesser documented credentials, e.g., transcripted certificates.* (Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv and four other groups)

- *Theological education should recognize the shifting and expanding role of faculty to include practitioners and the need to recognize credentials besides the traditional terminal degree.* (raised by six peer groups)

Part C. Specific Concerns over Current Standards

In addition to key themes and quality educational principles summarized in Parts A and B above, most of the eighteen peer groups identified specific concerns over some current standards that they felt needed revising or replacing in the redevelopment process. Some of the larger issues have already been listed: definition of educational quality, meaning and role of formation, emphasis on accessibility and flexibility, desire for modality neutrality, the value of diversity, and the growing importance of partnerships. Listed here are some more specific concerns over certain standards that surfaced in the peer group reports.

1. Clarify (or justify) the difference between the MDiv and professional MA degree programs, defining the MDiv as primarily a professional degree (it's current function as both an academic and a professional degree is confusing) and open the possibility of "stackable" professional credentials (Educational Standard, ES.7 on shared credit, and Degree Program Standards A and B)—cited by Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv Peer Group; the stackability of credentials was also cited by a

number of other peer groups. Concern over continuing to distinguish between professional and academic degrees was also raised by the University Divinity Schools Peer Group.

2. Define a better benchmark than "duration" for the adequacy of degree programs (Section 3.2 of the various Degree Program Standards)—cited by Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv Peer Group.

3. Replace the 15% limit on admitting students without BA degrees, which unfairly penalizes smaller schools, with a more competency-based approach to determining readiness for graduate studies, or at least distinguish between the two student groups affected by this limit: higher-achieving traditional undergraduates and non-traditional underserved or educationally-interrupted students (Degree Program Standards A and B, sections 4.2)—cited by Accelerated Bachelor's/MDiv Peer Group; concerns over the 15% limit were also raised by the Duration/Reduced Credit MDiv Peer Group, the Permanent Diaconate Peer Group, the Programs for Latino/a Students Peer Group, the Programs in Prison Peer Group, and the Students without Bachelor's Peer Group.

4. Replace the current DMin program content areas with "four intended DMin outcomes" and replace the MDiv equivalency standard with "four entry-level DMin competencies," as developed by the DMin Admissions Peer Group (Degree Program Standard E, sections E.2 and E.4.1); revise the ministry experience DMin admission standard to "three years of substantive ministry experience" without specifying that it be subsequent to the first graduate theological degree (E.4.3)—cited by the DMin Admissions Peer Group.

5. Revise the DMin standard on projects (E.2.4) to "acknowledge the diverse ways by which successful ministry professionals approach the DMin project," eliminate the requirement that all DMin projects be accessioned in the library (E.2.4.2), and update the definition of ministry in the DMin standard to reflect a broader range of contexts for ministry practitioners—cited by the DMin Identity Peer Group.

6. Emphasize intercultural competencies more than the current standards do (e.g., Standard 3 on curriculum, sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4 on diverse publics and on global awareness and engagement)—cited by Permanent Diaconate Peer Group; echoed by the Programs for Latino/a Students Peer Group, but as a requirement; also raised by both Global Partnerships Peer Groups and by the Historically Black Schools Peer Group.

7. Eliminate or reduce quantitative-based, prescriptive standards in favor of more qualitative-based, descriptive standards that allow for greater flexibility; for example, rewrite the requirement on educational equivalency for various admission standards to allow for the differing ways that equivalency is determined globally (e.g. Degree Program Standards, section 4 on admissions)—cited by the second Global Partnership Peer Group.

8. Consider including in the Commission's scope the accrediting of undergraduate degrees in theology—cited by the Programs in Prison Peer Group (and a few other groups).