

Key Principles for Good Graduate Theological Education

(February 2019 draft)

Editor's Note: The following draft is a product of the task force for the Redevelopment of the ATS Standards and Procedures. This draft was approved by the ATS Board of Commissioners on February 7, 2019, as ready to be shared with the membership for its input. We welcome any input, which you may give by emailing the task force at redvelopment@ats.edu.

The following key principles may be viewed as concepts that will help frame the next set of standards for the ATS Commission on Accrediting. Using the metaphor of building, these principles are not the final structure (they are not standards), but they provide a basis for conceiving, framing, and writing the standards. They could be viewed as the building's "supporting walls." These principles are not intended to line up specifically with either the current or new standards (e.g., some principles will apply to multiple standards, and some may attend only to a part of a standard). Rather, they help point the way toward those standards and articulate key commitments of those standards. This list is also still a draft with more input needed, especially from the membership. These principles might also serve as prompts for conversation that help lead the task force into greater clarity regarding the structure and commitments of the next set of standards.

It is worth noting that some of the words used in these principles are not clearly defined and may be subject to varying interpretations. That is intentional at this point—for two reasons: (1) we still need input to help refine and clarify some concepts and (2) some concepts do not lend themselves to single or simple definitions that would be acceptable or meaningful to all our member schools (e.g., formation). Two important assumptions in this redevelopment process are that (a) standards will need to be interpreted (and some terms defined) within a given school's context, and (b) peer judgment will be crucial to that interpretation process. For example, these principles use terms like "meaningful," "appropriate," "sound," and "regular and substantive interaction." While the redeveloped standards (that will include far more detail than these principles) will likely clarify or demonstrate what is meant by some of these terms, any set of written standards is subject to interpretation—by peer reviewers. It is also important to note that each of the following principles is meant to apply regardless of institutional structure or educational model, and always to be understood in light of a school's own mission and context.

The following principles are not "ranked" or ordered, although all flow from the mission and commitments of The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting (as noted in the draft Preamble to the Standards). The word "graduate" in the title to this document is intended to indicate that these principles are focused on the work of our members as schools engaged in graduate, professional theological education. At the same time, we understand that "good theological education" is not limited to those schools or those modes of theological education.

1. *Good theological education is rooted in meaningful theological values.* Good theological education embodies a community of faith and learning that is guided by a theological vision and that cultivates habits of theological reflection and service.
2. *Good theological education prioritizes student learning and student formation.* Good theological education demonstrates sound pedagogy and appropriate student learning outcomes in the context of a cohesive curriculum, and sees formation, even transformation, as central to the student experience.

3. *Good theological education requires communities of engagement.* Good theological education occurs within the context of regular and substantive interaction between teachers and learners and among learners within a viable community of learning, with “teachers” understood to include faculty, librarians, administrators, staff, and an appropriately wide range of other stakeholders.
4. *Good theological education is contextually appropriate.* Good theological education attends carefully to the context, communities, and constituencies in which, and for which, it is offered, and responds to changing contexts with creativity and innovation.
5. *Good theological education demonstrates diversity.* Good theological education values and promotes diversity in its many manifestations, including attention to cultural competency, global engagement, and marginalized voices.
6. *Good theological education has appropriate institutional resources and support.* Good theological education demonstrates careful planning, sound budgeting, and good stewardship, with attention to the institution’s financial, physical, technological, and library and information needs.
7. *Good theological education requires sufficient and appropriate personnel.* Good theological education is highly relational, requiring a sufficient number of faculty and staff who are appropriately qualified for and supported in their work.
8. *Good theological education requires a healthy institutional environment.* Good theological education depends on shared governance based on a bond of trust among boards, administrators, faculty, staff, students, and ecclesial bodies; it requires clear grounding in its mission, effective patterns of leadership and management, and resiliency in times of stress.
9. *Good theological education demonstrates careful institutional planning and evaluation.* Good theological education builds from a clear sense of institutional purpose, is undertaken through intentional processes of planning, is enacted through careful instructional and organizational design, and is evaluated in light of the mission and context of each school.
10. *Good theological education depends upon integrity and mutual accountability.* Good theological education is offered by schools that act with integrity, are committed to freedom of inquiry, and hold themselves accountable—to each other, to communities of faith, and to the broader public—for their quality, transparency, and authenticity.