

# Preamble to redeveloped standards

*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 [redemption@ats.edu](mailto:redemption@ats.edu).*

*INTRODUCTORY NOTE: It may seem premature to write a preamble to the Standards before they have even begun to be written, but the Redevelopment Task Force intends this document to serve as a working guide for its unfolding work. This preamble will undoubtedly need to be revised once the new Standards are written. Still, we believe having at least a draft preamble early in this process will serve two important functions. First, it will help remind us all of our common purposes and priorities as a membership organization—that seems particularly important as our member schools embody increasingly diverse approaches to theological education. Second, it will help remind us of our distinctives and differences as an accrediting agency. Most accrediting agencies have some sort of preamble or preface that provides a philosophical and historical context for their standards. This preamble attempts to summarize our own philosophy and approach to accreditation. We know the redevelopment process is just beginning, and we don't know yet where this journey will take us. Still, every journey must begin somewhere—and here is our beginning.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Accreditation is a voluntary process through which schools, in the context of ongoing relationships, mutually assure one another's educational quality with an eye toward ongoing institutional improvement. Through self-review, a school has regular opportunities to reflect intentionally on its distinctive strengths and its areas of desired growth in light of its unique mission and distinct context. Self-review then supports the school's efforts in planning, evaluation, and imagination. Through peer review, an accredited school is endorsed by its peers as an institution of quality and integrity, which affirms the school's value to society, as well as its trustworthiness.

Within the context of graduate theological education, accreditation is an ongoing way to live into the intersections of faith and learning. It involves giving close attention to the histories that ground us and the visions of the future that draw us forward. It is grounded in care for people, communities, and institutions, now and in the future. It emphasizes stewardship and responsibility, while also holding space for grace and interdependence. It acknowledges the centrality of the unique mission of each individual school, while also recognizing that there is more that brings us together than separates us. Accreditation helps schools improve—not simply for their own sake, but primarily for the benefit of others, including the religious institutions and other communities who serve and are served by the alumni/ae of our schools. For all these reasons, accreditation is a deeply theological act.

As a membership organization, The Association of Theological Schools understands its mission thus: *"to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public."* The purpose of the Commission on Accrediting is to *"contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools"* (Commission Bylaws, 1.2). Since 1938, the ATS Commission on Accrediting has maintained standards for its member schools, developed and approved by the membership—always with a focus on how those standards can help member schools improve in educational quality.

The standards that follow reflect foundational priorities of the membership, chief among which are these:

1. These standards seek in all ways to embody the ATS mission: *“to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public”* and the ATS Commission purpose: *“to contribute to the enhancement and improvement of theological education through the accreditation of schools.”*
2. These standards recognize and respect member schools’ unique missions and distinctive theological commitments, while upholding common understandings and aspirations that draw us together as a community amidst our diversity.
3. These standards are based on a bond of trust between member schools and peer reviewers, including the ATS Board of Commissioners and the ATS staff. Integrity and transparency, along with reliable evidence and professional judgment, are crucial to the accreditation process.
4. These standards ensure through evidence that our schools are effectively accomplishing their educational missions and continually seeking to improve in the achievement of those missions.
5. These standards focus on the quality of graduate theological education, attending more to how well student learning is achieved than to what institutional inputs or resources are available.
6. These standards focus on both the health of the overall institution and of individual degree programs (particularly, professional graduate degree programs) that the institution offers.
7. These standards seek to simplify the task of accreditation in ways that support our member schools and our publics, including students and the communities they seek to serve, with an emphasis on accountability, creativity, flexibility, and sustainability.

The standards that follow here emphasize “a return to first principles”—why does this school exist and in what ways does it contribute in its context to the betterment of faith communities and society. They articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the ATS membership over many decades, while also attending to the diversity and variety of our schools today. As such, the standards reflect agreed-upon educational principles, with illustrative practices, that help each member school better achieve its distinctive educational mission in light of its particular context. They assure the public of each school’s educational quality—based on the professional judgment of peer and public members. They also foster flexibility and innovation. In all these ways, the following standards help schools embody their missions, grow in light of their missions, and be transparent about their missions.

These standards are designed to be used in the following ways: (1) by an institution in a self-study process to evaluate how well it meets the standards, culminating in a self-study report; (2) by a group of peer evaluators who review the self-study report and visit the institution to verify how well it meets the standards, culminating in an evaluation committee report; and (3) by a representative and publicly recognized accrediting body of peers and public members (called commissioners) who review the institution’s self-study report and the evaluation committee’s report in light of the standards, culminating in a decision to grant or renew (or not) the institution’s accreditation for a specified period of time, with any specified conditions. Standards are also used by an institution seeking approval for a substantive change outside of its current accreditation scope (e.g., initiating a new degree) and by commissioners in determining whether to approve any such change. Beyond all these formal outcomes, these standards also attempt to describe good graduate theological education in ways that serve our schools now and help them grow into the future.