

# Key questions and concerns regarding the proposed redevelopment of ATS Commission Standards and Procedures

By TOM TANNER

*As the Board of Commissioners has reflected the last few years on the proposed redevelopment of the current Standards and Procedures, a number of questions have arisen regarding the philosophy, content, and structure of what a revised set of Standards and Procedures might look like.*



The following list of questions is not meant to be exhaustive, definitive, or final. Rather, these questions are intended to stimulate the membership's thinking about what issues they should consider in this redevelopment process—whether these issues or others not listed here. The Board plans to use these questions (and others that might arise) as a basis for some small group conversations at the 2018 Biennial Meeting in Denver this coming June. That will occur during a “working forum” after the motion to authorize a redevelopment is considered by the membership. The forum will provide an opportunity not only for the membership to address these questions, but also to offer wisdom and provide input into the redevelopment process.

## **Philosophy**

### **1. Should this redevelopment process have an overall framing question?**

The last major revision in 1996 was guided by this question: What is the good theological school? Given the growing diversity, differing structures, and varying

pedagogies of our schools today, would better questions be: What is good (graduate) theological education? What do we want to see in the good theological school graduate? What are the key principles undergirding good theological education?

### **2. What are the core values, assumptions, and philosophy that should undergird and guide our Standards and Procedures? Should those be made explicit in a preamble or preface?**

Many accrediting bodies begin by explicitly stating their values and assumptions. It's possible that our “common” assumptions were more clearly understood (implicitly) in the past, and it may be important for us to name them explicitly now. Our current preface says: “The standards both define minimal requirements for accreditation and identify qualities associated with good institutional and educational practice; as such, they articulate the shared understandings and accrued wisdom of the theological school community regarding normative institutional performance.”

**3. What roles should the Standards play for our member schools? Should they (a) help define our industry, (b) improve educational quality, (c) foster public accountability, (d) encourage creativity, and/or (e) uphold diversity? What roles are most critical in this redevelopment?**

The current Standards talk about both quality assurance and quality improvement. We also know that the Standards are used by member schools as they design programs (a sort of handbook for deans), as they advocate for particular issues or constituencies (leverage), and as they define the industry. What roles should the redeveloped Standards play? Might some of these roles be better addressed by other means (e.g., policy statements or training materials)?

## **Content**

**4. Given the hybrid nature of ATS accreditation (both institutional and programmatic), should the Institutional Standards distinguish more clearly between the expectations for freestanding schools and those for embedded schools?**

At present, nearly half of ATS schools are embedded in a larger institution. Should some (or all) Institutional Standards apply only to freestanding schools? Or, should there be a separate set of Institutional Standards for embedded or dually accredited schools that focus more specifically on the resource needs of the theological degree programs?

**5. Might the complexity and length of our Standards be reduced (from 100+ pages) to something simpler and more attentive to the contextual realities of our schools by focusing more on quality educational principles and less on specific educational practices? Similarly, what priority should be given to educational outcomes, the dominant theme of most current accrediting standards?**

If so, what are the most important quality educational principles (e.g., reflect theological values, live out a theological mission, prioritize educational outcomes over institutional resources, focus on formation, require a community of engagement, prize diversity, act with integrity, demonstrate appropriate institutional support, etc.)? How might we describe the educational outcomes that matter to us communally, while still respecting the

mission and context of each individual school? And how do we name “outcomes” of quality assurance without falling into compliance language?

## **Structure**

**6. Is the current three-fold structure of the Standards (Institutional, Educational, Degree Program) the most appropriate and feasible?**

In addition to the question above about the role of the Institutional Standards for embedded schools, we note that many schools still regularly omit the Educational Standard when engaging in the self-study process, and that the three-fold structure seems to invite redundancy (e.g., admissions guidelines are found in all three sections). At the same time, it may still be helpful to think in “tiers”—questions that affect the whole institution, questions that affect all educational programming, and questions that affect particular degree programs.

**7. Should we keep the same Institutional Standards or could some be combined or re-envisioned?**

As with the previous question, the present division leads to some silos (e.g., Standard 4. Library), as well as some redundancies (for example, there is a lot of overlap between Standard 3. Curriculum, and Standard 5. Faculty). What division would make the most sense to us today?

**8. Should the Standards be modality-specific or modality-neutral?**

Some of the length of the current Standards comes from focusing on each specific modality of education (on campus, off campus, online, etc.). Might there be value in focusing instead on outcomes and on quality educational principles (see #5 above) that must be met by any educational model or delivery modality?

**9. Should we keep ten Degree Program Standards, or could some be combined or re-envisioned?**

Some of the current categories apply to only a handful of schools (e.g., Standards C and H on Church Music), leading us to wonder if they should be combined with other Standards. Others seem less distinct than perhaps they once were (e.g., the difference between an academic

MA and a professional MA is sometimes a blurry one). Should the Degree Program Standards be less explicit, perhaps focused more on what we now call degree program categories? What distinctions matter to us, and what might we leave to schools?

**10. Should we continue to have a separate set of Notations?**

At times, it seems that the Notations serve as a subset (or, even, separate set) of Standards to which schools are held accountable. Might there be a different way to indicate lack of conformity to one or more Standards? In addition, given that notations are now understood to be more serious than they once were, we wonder whether notations (as they function at present) are different enough from probation that a continued distinction is warranted.

**11. Should the current Procedures continue as a separate document?**

The Procedures have expanded over the years from three to 30 pages, and each change must be approved by

the membership as a whole. Could key concerns in the Procedures (e.g., membership categories or substantive changes) be incorporated into the Standards (as other accrediting agencies do)? Could the more detailed parts (e.g., complaints, or appeals) be left to the Board's Policy Manual (that now repeats much of this content, and can be modified in a timelier fashion)?

**12. What role should the US Department of Education (USDE) expectations play in the Standards?**

While some USDE expectations make sense for all our member schools (e.g., helping students succeed, acting with integrity, having appropriate resources), others seem less useful, particularly as a bi-national accrediting agency. Might the less useful USDE expectations be treated separately from the Standards, as a distinct "US federal compliance" document that applies only to those under USDE jurisdiction (as many accreditors do now), allowing it to be updated more regularly?



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