

Membership to vote on authorization of redevelopment of ATS Commission Standards and Procedures

BY FRANK YAMADA

One year ago, as announced in the February 2017 issue of Colloquy Online, the ATS Board of Commissioners authorized a subcommittee to design a standards redevelopment process for the membership to consider at the 2018 Centennial Biennial Meeting in Denver.



As noted then, it has been nearly a quarter century since the last major reconsideration of the Commission's Standards and Procedures in 1996. And while there have been some revisions since then (most recently in 2010–2012), much has changed among ATS member schools and within theological education over the last two decades. Evidence of those widespread changes is seen in the \$7 million Educational Models and Practices Project (2015–2018), funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., in which more than 90% of ATS schools have participated.

In light of such sweeping changes, a major redevelopment—by contrast with ongoing revisions—of those two membership-approved documents (the Standards and Procedures) seems timely. Last month, the Board unanimously approved the subcommittee's redevelopment plan, which it has spent the last year designing. That plan begins with the following motion to be brought by the Board to the membership for a vote at the June 2018 meeting:

“To authorize the ATS Board of Commissioners to undertake a comprehensive redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation and the Commission Policies and Procedures expeditiously and with a substantial participation process.”

Along with this motion, the Board also approved in principle at its February 2018 meeting a rationale, work plan, timetable, and comprehensive communications strategy for the redevelopment process. While more about those components will be communicated later this spring, it is worth noting here that the Board currently envisions this as most likely a two-year process. It will officially begin with a vote by the ATS membership to authorize the redevelopment at the June 2018 Biennial Meeting and could conclude at the June 2020 Biennial Meeting with a vote by the ATS membership to approve a redeveloped set of Standards and Procedures. (See point #8 in "Ten Points to Remember in the Redevelopment Process" on

the following page regarding possible plans for grandfathering any approved revisions.)

During the redevelopment process, the membership will have ample opportunities for input through a variety of means, on a variety of issues. More will be said about that in upcoming issues of *Colloquy Online*, but the process will reflect these sentiments expressed by Harry Gardner, Board Chair:

“We on the Board of Commissioners view our role as that of ‘the stewards of the standards.’ Our job as this process develops is to ensure that all voices share in an intentional, committed, consultative, and iterative process.”

To help guide this membership-wide effort, the Board also appointed a 19-member redevelopment task force at its February 2018 meeting, pending approval of the authorization motion by the membership this June. The members of this task force, whose names will be announced later this spring, represent the broad diversity of ATS membership, including such key areas as nationality, gender, race and ethnicity, ecclesial families, institutional roles, school size and structure, and accreditation experience. Stay tuned for further details in future issues of *Colloquy Online*.



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Ten Points to Remember in the Redevelopment Process

1. The ATS Board of Commissioners announced in a February 2017 *Colloquy Online* article that it would be initiating a major revision (redevelopment) of the ATS Standards of Accreditation and the Commission Policies and Procedures, and it has more recently announced further details about that redevelopment process (see point # 7 below).
2. The unique character of ATS accreditation means that our Standards and Procedures are written by the members, approved by the members, for the sake of the members, with the goal of promoting the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public. This means that the work of redevelopment is the work of the schools.
3. The most recent revision of the Standards and Procedures was in 2010–2012 (a modest revision); the last comprehensive redevelopment was in 1996. As ATS reports and presentations have demonstrated, ATS membership has changed dramatically over this time (e.g., number of member schools, ecclesial traditions represented, changing student demographics, financial stresses, new educational models, use of technology, number of degrees, number of embedded schools, and so on).
4. The Board of Commissioners engages in regular evaluation of the Standards (as is required by the Board's Policy Manual, I.A.2.b). From such evaluation, the Board observes that the current Standards are still "working" and that many aspects of the Standards have enduring value, but they also seem to be showing their age (e.g., see the nearly 150 exceptions granted by the Board since 2012).
5. From the \$7 million Educational Models and Practices Project (involving more than 90% of ATS member schools) and other major ATS initiatives, we know more now about the current practices and needs of ATS schools than at any point in the past. This knowledge is also informed by accreditation visits to more than 80% of ATS Commission schools over the past five years.
6. In a 2016 survey, the ATS membership indicated that one of ATS's highest priorities should be "a revision of accrediting standards to be relevant and flexible and to encourage innovation."
7. The Board intends to bring a motion to authorize the redevelopment at the 2018 Biennial, for a vote of the full membership. (The motion will be accompanied by a rationale and a proposed workplan.) If approved, this will formally begin the redevelopment process.
8. It is likely that process of redevelopment would run two years (2018–2020), although it could take longer. In any case, new Standards and Procedures must be approved by a 2/3 vote of the membership at a Biennial Meeting and would include an educational and grandfathering period after adoption. If the new Standards are adopted in 2020, it is likely that schools with accrediting visits up to and including spring 2022 may base their self-study reports on the new Standards and Procedures; schools with visits in fall 2022 or later must do so.
9. While we do not yet know what the redeveloped Standards will look like, we do have a clear sense of some of the shared values that will guide the work, including attention to and support of the unique mission of each school. The process will likely also include attention to simplicity while still fostering robust engagement, minimal compliance language while still maintaining quality assurance, an openness to innovation while affirming the accrued wisdom of our schools, a greater focus on principles than practices, and thoughtful attention to the contextual realities faced by our schools.
10. The Board is firmly committed to broad stakeholder involvement throughout this entire process. Watch for more information about opportunities for involvement and input on the ATS website, at ATS leadership events, in *Colloquy Online*, and from your Commission staff liaison.