

# Standards redevelopment reflections: including students in discernment

BY SARAH DRUMMOND

*When seeking to include a wide array of stakeholders in conversations about what our ATS Standards need to become, one size does not fit all. The Redevelopment Task Force (RTF) has had to think seriously not just about whom to include in our year of listening, but also how to include them.*



We have had an enviable array of data collection tools at our fingertips: surveys, funding for focus groups, and people willing to volunteer their wisdom, time, and energy toward subcommittees. So the question is not whether we have what we need to include all those affected by our standards, for that goes without saying. What we must consider are the best ways to hear those many and diverse voices.

One of the more creatively challenging constituent groups with which the RTF has sought to connect has been students. They are the *raison-d'être* of theological schools, and yet few are familiar with the concept of accreditation. To ask them what they think the standards should say about ensuring quality and improvement in schools other than their own might generate a great deal of data, but their recommendations might not make the greatest and best use of their knowledge, experience, and perspective. Yet, not to include them would be a tragic mistake and a glaring omission.

After discussing an array of possible approaches, the RTF decided to reach out to students by turning to our own backyards. Members of the RTF who currently serve

schools, which includes all except those who are part of the ATS staff in Pittsburgh, were invited to convene focus groups at their own institutions. Each member of the RTF presented those students with the ten “[Key Principles for Good Graduate Theological Education](#)” shared with the membership in the February issue of *Colloquy Online*. Students were invited to respond to those principles and offer their feedback on them. The hope was that students’ insights would help the RTF to better understand the principles’ validity (are they true?) and reliability (would they be true for any school?). The principles will be, after all, the foundation on which the redeveloped standards will be built.

In my own setting, I convened my focus group from among students taking a course I am teaching called Leadership and Change. Several students in the class have an interest or background in education, so accreditation was less mysterious to some than others. The “takers” numbered 12. We ate pizza and talked together for an hour about the principles. I was both impressed by the students’ observations and humbled by the

dimensions of the document I had not fully thought through. Some key learnings for me were that (1) language that feels very new to me, like “cultural competence,” already sounds outdated to my students and (2) emphases on communities of learning and spiritual formation are more important to students than I expected them to admit.

Other members of the RTF are experiencing similar moments of surprise and inspiration. It would seem that the practice of reaching out to our own students has had

an unexpected and delightful side-effect. Those who are part of the RTF, dedicating hundreds if not thousands of hours to the project of rehabbing the standards that guide our work, have been reenergized by these focus groups. Interactions with students remind us why we were doing this in the first place—our students deserve quality, are owed truth-in-advertising, and care deeply about the integrity of the schools that form them for ministry. If they care, so must we.



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