

ATS Standards of Accreditation review continues, webinar on progress set for this spring

By BARBARA MUTCH

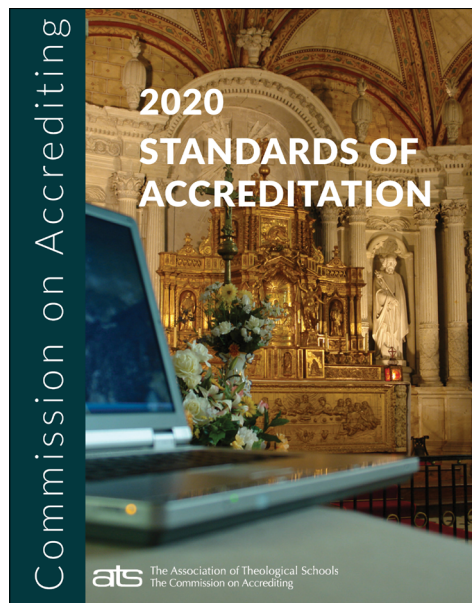
The working committee appointed by the Board of Commissioners to oversee the review of the ATS Standards of Accreditation and the Policies of the Commission on Accrediting is analyzing input gathered from 106 experienced peer reviewers, more than 400 individuals representing member schools at the 2024 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting, and several responses to a public call for comments.

The committee is comprised of Commissioners Christopher Ciccarino, academic dean of Immaculate Conception Seminary, Jim Thames, academic dean of Dallas Theological Seminary, and the ATS accrediting staff, and has met monthly since early fall 2024.

Much of the input has affirmed the ability of the *Standards* to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological education and to provide sufficient flexibility to allow schools to respond creatively in pursuit of their educational missions. Based on the input, the *Standards* continue to meet the needs of schools nearly five years after their adoption by the membership in June 2020.

Six topics emerged from an analysis of the input and highlight ways in which the educational and technological landscapes have changed since the *Standards* were approved. Each is being methodically addressed in relation to what is needed most by schools.

- The rise of **generative artificial intelligence** points to the need for additional self-study ideas to support schools in the implementation of GenAI, including transparency, security of data, human



control of decision-making, documentation of authentic data, and reliability.

- In response to growing interest by many schools in **Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)**, the Board of Commissioners-approved Guidelines for CBTE have been revised and updated. A webinar on CBTE was offered to more than 100 member participants and followed up by smaller webinars to allow member schools to engage with accrediting staff about questions related to their own schools' missions and contexts.
- **Schools embedded in other schools/institutions** point to the need for additional Self-Study Ideas to help schools sharing services in a significant way demonstrate how they meet the *Standards*. Additional attention has been given to clarifying some language in Standard 9 related to governance.
- **Global awareness** throughout the *Standards* will be addressed in several upcoming *Colloquy Online* articles.

- The capacity of the *Standards* in relation to **online learning and digital resources** will be examined this spring.
- **The place of residency in the PhD program** will also be examined.

Additionally, multiple educational opportunities for supporting schools in their commitment to quality theological education are being developed. A series of articles engaging the *Standards* is featured in each issue of the 2024–25 *Colloquy Online*. Beginning with the principle-based nature of the *Standards*, articles to date have exegeted the integrity and transparency at the heart of Standard 1 (Mission and Integrity), lifted up the role of curiosity in Standard 2 (Planning and Evaluation), explored the freedom for each school to develop contextual and missional responses to student formation (Standard 3, Student Learning and Formation), and celebrated the ways in which libraries provide “citizenship in the land of knowledge” (Standard 6, Library and Information Services).

Canvas courses are being developed particular to Standard 2 (Planning and Evaluation) and Standard 10 (Institutional Resources). These two areas generate the largest number of interim reports for schools. All schools will be encouraged to complete the courses three years ahead of their comprehensive evaluation visits, so that they can begin the self-study process from a stronger position.

Few questions were raised or comments offered by member schools regarding the *Policies* of the Commission on Accrediting and no changes appear to be needed for these membership-approved accreditation processes. Board *Procedures*, statements approved by the Board of Commissioners to help them implement and interpret the *Policies*, are regularly reviewed by the Board. A recent review resulted in increased clarification for when a teach-out plan is required as a contingency as distinct from a teach-out plan that is required in the case of a school closure.

A membership-wide webinar on progress in the *Standards* review process will be held in late spring 2025.

Membership input will contribute to an initial draft of revisions to the *Standards* and *Policies*. This will be examined by the Board of Commissioners in early June and a first draft presented to the membership shortly thereafter. The membership's input will be sought again during fall and will, once again, contribute to a second draft. Following approval by the Board of Commissioners, an authorized draft will be made public in spring 2026. The membership will vote on the revision of the *Standards* and *Policies* at the 2026 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting.



Barbara Mutch is Senior Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A response to a question from the 2024 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting lunch review . . .

A **clock hour** is a 50-60 minute period of time consisting of faculty instruction or supervised experience (such as internships or practica). The period of time may be synchronous or asynchronous (as in distance education) where there is regular and substantive interaction between qualified instructors and students and among students, regardless of modality.

A **credit hour** is the amount of student work defined by an institution consistent with commonly accepted practice in graduate education that reasonably approximates not less than one hour of direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester hour of credit (or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit) or the equivalent amount of work over a different period of time; or at least an equivalent amount of work for other academic activities (such as internships and practica). A credit hour takes into account delivery method, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels.

All schools are encouraged to define both clock hour and credit hour in their handbooks and catalogs. (See Standards 1.6, 3.2, 3.9, 4.4 including *Ideas*, Procedure IV.H, and for Title IV schools CFR §600.2 Definitions.)