

# ATS Standards of Accreditation review makes substantial progress

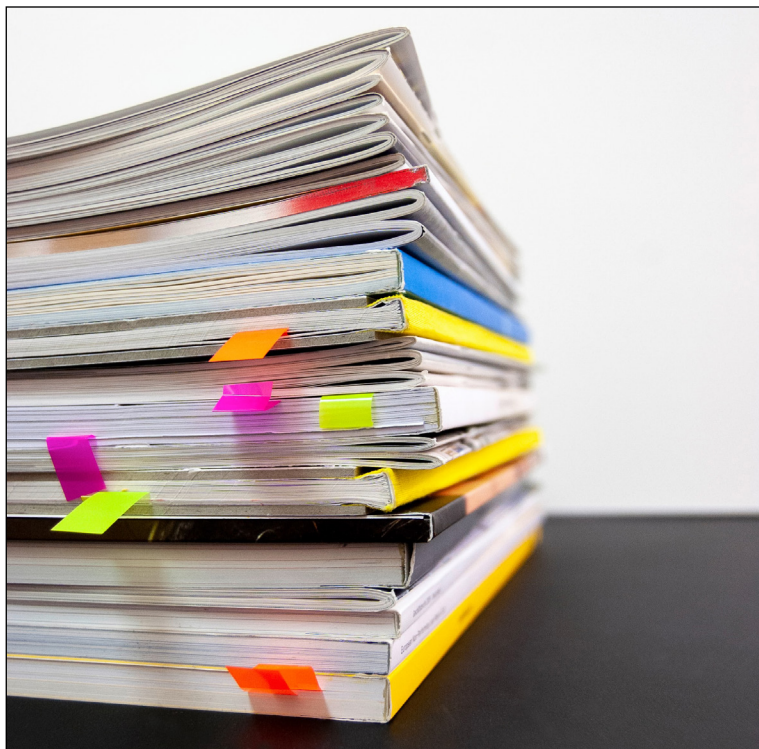
BY BARBARA MUTCH

As announced in the April issue of Colloquy Online, the Board of Commissioners authorized a review of the Standards of Accreditation and the Board-approved Policies in conformity with the Commission Policy on Board Responsibilities requiring periodic review of the Standards and Policies.

A working committee to oversee the review was appointed by the Board of Commissioners in February 2024. Commissioners Christopher Ciccarino, academic dean of Immaculate Conception Seminary, and Jim Thames, academic dean of Dallas Theological Seminary, represent the Board on the working committee and join the directors of accreditation from the ATS accrediting staff.

All peer reviewers who have served on committees to schools conducting comprehensive evaluations (self-studies) according to the *2020 Standards of Accreditation* were invited to complete a survey as the first source of input. By early May, 106 responses were received. Half of these peer reviewers have served on two or more visits and a similar number have also participated in self-study processes at their own schools, simultaneously broadening and deepening their engagement with the *Standards*.

Responses to survey questions from the peer reviewers indicated strong affirmation for the ability of the *Standards* to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological education (99 percent), to recognize and respect member schools' unique missions and distinctive theological commitments (99 percent), and to be characterized by sufficient flexibility to allow schools to



respond creatively in pursuit of the educational missions (97 percent). In addition, multiple ideas for education and training to support schools in their commitment to live into the *Standards* were identified. Many of these will be developed into webinars and various resources to be offered to the membership in the months ahead.

A Public Call for Comments on the *Standards and Policies* of the Commission was issued May 1 as a second source of input. By July 1, comments from six individuals were received and these are being incorporated into the larger body of data. The membership will be invited to use the same email address to respond to draft revisions during the next two years—[standardsreview@ats.edu](mailto:standardsreview@ats.edu).

The third and largest occasion for membership input into the review process occurred during the 2024 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in Atlanta. On June 20, more than 400 individuals from member schools participated in a

structured review of the *Standards* and *Policies*. Facilitated by Commissioners, experienced peer reviewers, other school leaders, and members of the working committee, participants reviewed the *Standards* and *Policies* for clarity, consistency, comprehensiveness, and overall helpfulness to the member schools.

A tremendously rich pool of data was generated through the exercise. Appreciation for the *Standards* was expressed in comments that included, “The *Standards* are short, clear, and to the point,” and “The *Standards* help to keep the schools focused on key principles such as mission and student outcomes.” Helpful suggestions and insights were raised about word choices (e.g., whether “reinvigorate” is a fitting goal for a DMin program) and substantive questions were offered (e.g., whether the PhD *Standards* should pay more attention to formation).

Additionally, and similar to the data received from the Peer Reviewer Survey, many places for education and training related to the *Standards* were identified by participants—strengthening school capacities in planning and evaluation, supporting faculty in the work of formation, etc. Interestingly, a handful of “big topics” emerged throughout the data, pointing to ways in which the educational and technological landscapes have changed since the *Standards* were first being developed in 2018. These include the implications of AI on the overall self-study process; the nimbleness of the *Standards* in evaluating

competency-based theological education programs; the capacity of the *Standards* in relation to online learning and digital resources; and the particular needs of member schools embedded in larger institutions, especially in relation to governance. Each of the topics will be considered by the working committee in the upcoming months, with learning informing the first draft of recommendations anticipated to come to the membership in fall 2025.

Thoughtful questions and comments, though fewer in number than those for the *Standards*, were offered in relation to the *Policies*. These, too, will be considered carefully and will inform any recommended revisions to the ways in which the membership conducts their accrediting processes.

The working group is deeply grateful for the enthusiastic engagement of the membership in these early months of the review process. It will provide its first update to the Board of Commissioners in February 2025.

Member schools are invited to explore ATS resources that offer information, guidance, and support for many topics mentioned by respondents to the peer review survey and the Biennial review. ATS staff liaisons are always available to help, as well.



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## Accreditation Resources

- [Standards of Accreditation with Self-Study Ideas](#)
- [ALO/CAO Orientation](#)
- [Guidelines for Competency-Based Theological Education](#)
- [Guidelines for Global Awareness and Engagement](#)