

# Faculty: reviewing ATS Standard 8

By STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

*There are various common images for the role and importance of faculty in theological schools. Some speak of the faculty as the “heart of the institution.” An experienced theological educator described the faculty like a denomination’s collection of rare gems, highlighting their expertise, rigorous study, and the ministerial experience shared with students and other constituents. A regular comment by bishops in the Roman Catholic Church is that “some of my best priests” are those they have assigned to serve as seminary faculty. This is especially noteworthy given the serious shortage of priests to serve parishes and the other important ministries in their dioceses.*

When schools write their institutional self-study reports in preparation for comprehensive accreditation visits, they regularly emphasize the quality and dedication of the school’s faculty. Accrediting liaisons and evaluation committees often find these qualities to be true even in schools that struggle in other areas. Conversations with students during accreditation visits regularly emphasize the quality of the faculty and how faculty members have impacted their learning and formation while in school. Students and alumni also appreciate relationships with faculty who have shaped all areas of life, in many cases far beyond their time in the theological school.

In data from every Graduating Student Questionnaire gathered by ATS over the past couple of decades, the response to the “three most important influences on educational experience” has consistently named faculty as the



most important at roughly twice the percentage of any other single response. In fact, the consistency of response that students valued faculty most highly by that margin became so routine that the questions were revised to set aside “faculty” as an option so that other data could be analyzed without that most obvious choice taking 20 to 25 percent of the top responses.

Student learning and formation (Standard 3) is a priority of the *Standards of Accreditation* (see *Self-Study Handbook*, p. 6), and it is obviously the faculty who most directly serve the school’s mission in that area.

## **Standard 8 (opening paragraph)**

**Faculty:** *Theological schools are communities of faith and learning dependent upon a qualified, supported, and effective faculty of sufficient size and diversity to achieve schools’ educational missions and support student learning and formation. Faculty responsibilities, composition, and qualifications are clearly defined and appropriate to graduate theological education. Faculty are supported and provided ongoing opportunities for professional development. Faculty roles in teaching and learning, scholarship, and service are clear and consistent with schools’ missions and are fulfilled effectively by the faculty.*

Consistent with the emphases of the opening paragraphs for each of the standards, the work of faculty is oriented to theological schools that are “communities of faith and learning.” The work of faculty contributes to the effective fulfillment of the schools’ missions, especially through the core work of student learning and formation.

As has been noted before in these articles about the 2020 Standards, prior versions included greater detail and frequently named practices that the school “should” or “shall” employ. The 2020 Standards are based on educational principles stated in simple, declarative sentences (see *Preamble to the Standards of Accreditation*, p. iv). These standards foreground each school’s mission and theological commitments.

To illustrate this difference, Standard 5 Faculty in the 2010 Standards requires schools to demonstrate fulfillment of the standard by a number of specific actions. Of the almost 1,000 words in the 2010 Standard, “should” and “shall” are each used 15 times. Standard 8 Faculty in the standards adopted by the membership in 2020 is 720 words in length and uses neither word. A feature of the 2020 Standards is the use of Self-Study Ideas. These ideas follow each standard and are clearly separated from the actual standards.

The Self-Study Ideas for Standard 8 use the word “might” 46 times, giving examples of what a school could do to demonstrate fulfillment of the standard. Every school must meet all of the standards, but they do so “in various ways (see *Preamble*, p. iii).”

While the faculty standard is in many ways similar to General Institutional Standard 5 Faculty, approved in 2010, there are a number of subtle differences. The 2020 Standard continues to emphasize the fundamental work of faculty toward fulfilling the school’s mission, but it also reflects greater flexibility that allows schools to utilize a variety of forms and to demonstrate their educational effectiveness.

## **Faculty Responsibilities, Composition, and Qualifications**

**8.1. Responsibilities:** While previous standards noted the

faculty responsibility to design and implement the school’s educational programs, the 2020 Standards also note the faculty’s role to “evaluate and improve the school’s educational programs in collaboration with other appropriate parties.”

**8.2. Composition:** Previous standards are more specific in naming “race, ethnicity, and gender” as particular foci of diversity. The 2020 Standards use more general terms, calling for the composition of the faculty in “number and diversity” that “demographically and educationally” best fits the school’s mission, programs, student body, and theological commitments.

**8.3. Qualifications:** The 2020 Standards are somewhat more open to credentials other than the research doctorate, noting that each faculty member “typically” holds “an appropriate doctorate” but also “relevant professional/eccliesial/denominational experience.” Schools may employ faculty who do not hold a doctorate if the school “documents that such faculty have suitable qualifications.”

## **Faculty Support and Development**

**8.4 and 8.5.** The school supports both full-time and part-time faculty and “has and consistently follows” fair and ethical policies and procedures for faculty employment.

**8.6.** The school affirms “freedom of inquiry for faculty with policies and procedures that are consistent with the school’s mission and theological commitments.” Since 1996, the *Standards of Accreditation* have used the language of “freedom of inquiry” as being more suited to theological schools than the more politically conflicted phrase “academic freedom” that is commonly used in broader higher education.

**8.7.** Recognizing the growing diversity of schools, changes in faculty roles and work, the variety of institutional missions, and disparity of resources, the 2020 Standards are more general in their expectation of support for faculty professional development that is “consistent with the school’s mission and needs.”

## ***Faculty Roles in Teaching and Learning, Scholarship, and Service***

**8.8. Teaching and Learning:** This standard combines teaching and learning into one standard in contrast to the previous version that had separate standards for each.

**8.9. Scholarship:** The broader category “scholarship” is used rather than “theological research.” The standard is also less specific about exactly how the school supports faculty scholarship. In the current standard, there is also less emphasis on the norms of scholarship that address “commonly accepted standards in higher education.”

**8.10.** The faculty role in “service” is emphasized more than in previous versions of the standards. The term “service” is intended to cover “a wide range of activities that are consistent with the school’s mission and with faculty members’ interests and capacities.”

**8.11.** This standard notes that teaching and learning, scholarship, and service, named in 8.8-10, are viewed holistically and understood to be interrelated in support of the mission, ethos, and values of the school. The standard also introduces the language of “individual and collective vocations of theological faculty.”



Stephen R. Graham is strategic director of context and continuity; director of accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.