

Mission and integrity: reviewing ATS Standard 1

BY BARBARA MUTCH

Well before the topics of mission and integrity are introduced as the focus of the first of the ten ATS Standards of Accreditation, they are established in the Preamble as foundational to the life of an accredited theological school:

*Through self-review, a school has regular opportunities to reflect intentionally on its distinctive strengths and its areas of desired growth in light of its unique **mission** and distinct context and in light of the standards . . . Through peer review, an accredited school is endorsed by its peers as one of quality and **integrity**, which affirms the school's value to society, as well as its trustworthiness.*

The *Standards* are grounded in the conviction that every school has a mission that is distinct, that every school is sent for some reason, and that every school has a specific task with which it is charged. The opening paragraph of Standard 1 further defines a school's mission as theological in nature, appropriate to a school's particular context and to graduate theological education in general, and achieved with institutional integrity, thereby linking mission and integrity.

When used of a person, integrity—from the Latin *integer* for “intact”—points to the quality of being honest. When used of an institution, it speaks of the quality of being whole, undivided, and internally consistent. Standard 1



invites graduate theological schools to ask themselves: What is our school *for*? And how does our school *conduct* itself in the pursuit of its purpose?

A school's **mission** is to be publicly stated (not tacit), strategically important to all that it does (with student learning and formation central to its mission and purpose), and regularly examined to ensure ongoing fit. The statement of the school's mission makes evident how the school engages its various constituencies, including any larger institution with which the school relates. Schools generate many artifacts that can demonstrate how a school uses its mission to guide its activities and the decisions it makes, chief among these being its strategic planning and evaluation practices. Focusing attention regularly on the school's mission supports continued alignment with its reason for being and discourages “mission creep” or a gradual shift in objectives.

Further, “**Integrity** and transparency . . . are crucial to the accreditation process” (Preamble). They are crucial because the standards with which all schools align are based on a bond of trust—between member schools and

peer reviewers, between member schools and the Board of Commissioners, between member schools and the ATS staff, and even among member schools. Transparency, while only mentioned twice in the *Standards* (1.4, 2.8) and once in the membership priorities (quoted above), is one of the many ways schools can demonstrate trustworthiness and the theological dimension of accreditation.

If transparency is understood as “presenting no obstacle to the passage of light, so that what is behind can be distinctly seen” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*), then every act of communication— institutional website, printed materials, interim reports to the Board of Commissioners—is an opportunity to allow what is *behind* to be clearly seen. Likewise, every program description and every self-study report are an opportunity to be honest and to be witness to a school’s internal consistency and wholeness.

Integrity embraces transparency in all written and printed communication and raises the bar to reach the quality of human interactions with all internal constituents and also with the broader public. “A healthy institutional environment with effective patterns of leadership, transparency, and communication” is one of the few phrases carried forward from the previous *Standards of Accreditation* because of the way in which these words succinctly express what integrity looks like when lived out in the life of a school.

Integrity influences how a school attends to global awareness and engagement as it chooses to conduct itself in a way that recognizes the interconnectedness of the world beyond an immediate context (Standard 1.4). In a similar (but not duplicative) way, each school demonstrates integrity by “valuing, defining, and demonstrating diversity” **always within the context of its mission, history, constituency, and theological commitments.**

One of the deepest commitments of the Board of Commissioners, peer reviewers, and ATS staff is to recognize and honor the mission, context, and theological commitments of each school on the “long pew” of the accredited membership. No school is ever held to an expression of diversity that conflicts with its own theological convictions.

Additionally, schools demonstrate integrity by ensuring they are responsible citizens in relation to all applicable laws and regulations (Standard 1.6). This pertains to having appropriate authority to operate and confer

degrees wherever the school does so and includes US-based schools enrolling online students from states other than that of its main campus. Schools that participate in US federal student aid programs (whether American or Canadian schools) are careful to meet all governmental regulations for those programs.

Finally, schools demonstrate integrity in their Commission membership responsibilities by responding accurately and in a timely fashion to all requests for information, whether in the form of Commission-required reports, visit-related documents, or annual data. Ensuring the accuracy

of submitted materials often involves review by multiple persons at a school prior to submission.

Integrity is also named elsewhere in the *Standards*. Schools with reduced-credit options for master’s degrees ensure the integrity of their degree programs through developing and implementing clearly stated policies for admission to and completion of programs (Standard 3.13). The Master of Divinity program has clearly articulated outcomes for personal and spiritual formation, including development in moral integrity (Standard 4.3). Financial staff ensure the integrity of financial records (Standard 10.7). The *Standards of Accreditation with*

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Self-Study Ideas offer suggestions regarding how careful practices related to library collection/services, admission, and technological resources enable schools to ensure integrity and demonstrate internal consistency (self-study ideas for Standards 6, 7, and 10).

In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote “God asks for the heart, and we must spell our answer in terms of deeds.” Schools guided by theological missions achieved with institutional integrity spell their answer in large, bold letters for all to see.



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