

# Principle-based *ATS Standards* provide member schools with innovation, flexibility

BY VALERIE REMPEL

*This article is the first in a series to be written by ATS Commission staff in the upcoming academic year that offers information, insight, and commentary regarding the ATS Commission staff-led review of the Standards that is currently underway.*

*Since approving the current Standards of Accreditation in June 2020, much has been made of the principle-based approach that characterizes them. While it's easy—and perhaps tempting—to simply see the Standards as a kind of checklist or even a set of rules that must be followed, the Standards are so much more. They exist to support schools with an emphasis on accountability, creativity, flexibility, and sustainability.*

The preamble to the 2020 *Standards* describes these as “principles of quality for graduate theological education that all schools meet in various ways.” Together with the *Standards*, these principles support the contextual nature of theological education. They represent a significant shift away from the “best practices” orientation of the previous *Standards*.

The 2020 *Standards* are founded upon and framed by Ten Educational Principles Guiding the Standards of Accreditation. These principles, crafted as part of the redevelopment process leading to adoption of the 2020 *Standards*, are published in the ATS Commission Self-Study Handbook



and now posted more prominently on the ATS website. They reflect the ATS membership’s understanding of what quality theological education looks like.

When reading the Educational Principles, it’s important to note that they do not have a one-to-one correlation with the *Standards*. Some principles relate to several standards and some standards relate to several principles. Rather, the principles provide a broad basis for understanding the *Standards* and articulate key commitments of the *Standards*.

The principles begin by affirming that graduate theological education is always rooted in theological values so that it embodies a community of faith and learning and is guided by a theological vision. The ATS principles recognize that theological education prioritizes student learning and formation and requires communities of engagement. They affirm the value of contextually appropriate education as well as the value of diversity,

demonstrated in its many manifestations. Several of the principles relate to institutional life, affirming that theological education has appropriate institutional resources and support, sufficient and appropriate personnel, a healthy environment, and demonstrates careful planning and evaluation. The tenth principle articulates an understanding that theological education depends upon integrity, trust, and mutual accountability.

In emphasizing accountability, creativity, flexibility, and sustainability, the *Standards* support schools' efforts to live out their missions. This is the deeply theological work ATS members engage in through graduate theological education. The 2020 version of the *Standards* was especially written to support the kind of innovative work ATS members are already engaged in and to make room for what is only now being imagined—one of the benefits of a principle-based approach to the *Standards*. Rather than prescribing a set of best practices that must be adhered to, they provide a normative framework for evaluating initiatives that will hopefully provide ample room for new ideas leading to new ways of doing things that meet the needs of students, faith communities, and the broader public in a sustainable manner.

When reading the 2020 *Standards*, it is helpful to remember that they reflect agreed-upon educational principles meant to help each member school better achieve its distinctive educational mission in its context. It is also important to remember that they are grounded in an expectation that a bond of trust exists not only with the Commission on Accrediting and one another as peers, but with stakeholders, too.

These *Standards* assure the public of each school's educational quality based on the professional judgment of peer and public members, while fostering a spirit of flexibility and innovation within the context of its mission, theological commitments, and resources.

In all these ways, the *Standards* help schools clarify their missions for themselves and their publics, embody their missions, grow in light of their missions, and be transparent about their missions.

Comments and questions are always welcome and may be sent to [standardsreview@ats.edu](mailto:standardsreview@ats.edu).



Valerie Rempel is *Director of Accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*