

Student services: reviewing Standard 7

By EMANUEL D. NAYDENOV

The preamble to Standard 7 in the ATS Standards of Accreditation states that “Theological schools are communities of faith and learning with a central focus on students and on serving them well.” This statement builds on a fundamental principle that runs through all the Standards and finds fuller expression in Standard 3, where theological schools are called upon to “give appropriate attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation.”

This is the principle, or better yet, the conviction that theological education is concerned with *cura personalis*—the entire person and not just the intellect of a student. This means that schools—through their faculty, administrators, and student services personnel—should get to know students beyond their transcripts and consider their strengths, limitations, calling, struggles, and aspirations in the process of educating and forming them for ministry. This must happen in the context of creating a caring community of formation in which students’ educational, spiritual, emotional, and financial needs are appropriately met to ensure growth and health.

It is within this context that we begin to appreciate the four distinct areas pertaining to a positive and healthy student experience, which are addressed by Standard 7. These areas include (1) **Student Recruitment and Admissions**, (2) **Student Support Services**, (3) **Student Financial**



Aid and Borrowing, and (4) **Student Career and Placement Services**. The policies and practices the *Standards* call for in these four areas clearly align with one or more of the four dimensions of student learning and formation mentioned in previous newsletter articles.

Student recruitment and admissions

In this section (Standards 7.2-4), the *Standards* call on schools to carefully attend to students’ intellectual preparedness for their studies as well as making sure that their vocational aspirations match the specific degree programs in which potential students are interested. This careful due diligence before granting admission serves the purpose of protecting students from potential failure and ensuing indebtedness if they fail to complete their studies due to a lack of preparedness, an unsuitable choice of degree program, or both.

Schools are also encouraged in their admission processes to carefully consider transcripts from global institutions. Many of the “transcript evaluation services” employed by schools do not clearly understand or recognize the accreditation standards of theological institutions or those accredited by the ATS Commission on Accrediting

and, therefore, do not give the most accurate evaluation of those transcripts. Schools are encouraged to ensure admission officers are appropriately trained in these areas.

Student support services

This section (Standards 7.5-7), addresses the supportive services all students need to receive after admission to their programs and during their studies. These services should be designed in ways that foster student learning and formation, improve student retention in the programs, and—above all—guarantee student safety. Services must be adequate, communicated clearly to students, and administered equitably and fairly, striving to uphold diversity and prevent discrimination. All services are intended to create a caring community of formation that attends to the intellectual, human, and spiritual aspects of student learning. An institution that genuinely cares for the well-being of its students will commit to evaluating the needs of its students and the effectiveness of its own services.

Student financial aid and borrowing

This section (Standard 7.8-9) deals both with the students' current financial (and physical) well-being and looks past graduation and into students' futures. On one hand, schools are encouraged to create and implement processes and procedures for administering financial aid to their students in an "equitable and nondiscriminatory" way, thus assisting in lightening their financial burdens. On the other hand, the Standard calls on schools to look for ways to minimize student debt and borrowing to ensure shortening the time to a debt-free future for their alums.

Student career and placement services

The last section of Standard 7 (Standard 7.10-11) provides for students' current and future needs like the preceding section. Its purpose is to give students access

to appropriate career counseling in addition to placement services relevant to their aspirations and callings. As it becomes clear from Standard 7.11, the school remains involved in the lives of its alums well past their graduations by soliciting helpful feedback on the effectiveness of individual programs for ministry in various vocational contexts.

Similarly, in the last two sections, the care and concern for the students' human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions continues into their lives and ministry post seminary.

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A school cannot

form a healthy and caring community for its students if it does not properly attend to its faculty, staff, and administrators first. This is where Standard 7 thoughtfully closes the loop by calling on all member schools to have "access to a sufficient number of qualified personnel to meet the needs..." and that "these personnel receive adequate resources and professional development to accomplish their work effectively..." In addition to proper training and resourcing, schools are encouraged to involve student services staff in the institutional decision-making processes, thus giving them agency to advocate on behalf of the students.



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