

Student learning and formation: reviewing Standard 3

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

What do you look for in students preparing to graduate with one of your degrees? When a student's name is called on graduation day, what gives you confidence that the person is ready to receive the degree—but more importantly—fitted to serve and to continue growing in knowledge and wisdom, character and faith, and skill and ability?



Within the contexts of distinctive missions and traditions, every school defines what they want students to know, to be, and to do by the time they are handed their diplomas. That is, schools are committed to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational formation of students.

In *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*, Daniel Aleshire, former executive director of The Association of Theological Schools, maintains that the next dominant model of theological education should be “formational” theological education. He admits that the term is contested but finds it “particularly useful precisely because it is undefined.” (p. 2)

Between 2018 and 2020, the task force charged with redeveloping the ATS *Standards of Accreditation*, solicited broad and extensive input from the ATS membership, received feedback from 50 focus groups, studied reports from 12 working groups (including one on formation), and considered findings from the *Educational Models and Practices* project. The last included conversations with deans from a variety of professional schools. The deans

from business, medicine, law, social work, education, and other professional schools did not necessarily use the word “formation,” which is found more normally in theological contexts. Yet they all strongly affirmed the importance of the development of students as humans, including such characteristics as strong ethics, relational skills, the ability to maintain appropriate boundaries, and good bedside manner.

“Formation” appears prominently in the 2020 ATS *Standards of Accreditation* in response to substantial input from the ATS membership in the process of redevelopment leading to membership adoption of those *Standards*. The *Self-Study Ideas* for Standard 3.1 match Aleshire’s move to leave terms undefined; in the case of the *Standards*, in order to allow the best fit possible within each school’s distinctive mission and religious context. “The terms, ‘intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational formation’ are intentionally not defined in these standards. Each school should define these terms in ways that best fit its mission and religious context. Some schools may prefer to use other terms. . .”

Standard 3 opening paragraph:

Student Learning and Formation: Theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation. Consistent with their missions and religious identities, theological schools give appropriate attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation. Schools pursue those dimensions with attention to academic rigor, intercultural competency, global awareness and engagement, and lifelong learning. Schools support student learning and formation through appropriate educational modalities and policies.

Each standard's opening paragraph begins by stating that "theological schools are communities of faith and learning." The communal nature of the school reflects the common purpose toward which all persons, structures, and activities point. Through membership in the ATS community, the schools accept accountability to one another through accreditation and good citizenship. The school community prepares students for a variety of roles in communities of faith and communities within the broader public.

Centered on student learning and formation

Both structurally and philosophically, the 2020 *Standards* have student learning and formation at their center. The "educational principles" that form the foundation for the *Standards*, named on page five of the *Self Study Handbook*, note that "Theological education prioritizes student learning and formation." The structure of the *Standards* groups together Standards 3 through 7 between the bookend standards that have to do with (1) mission and integrity, (2) planning and evaluation, (9) governance and administration, and (10) institutional resources.

Standard 3 on student learning and formation sets the stage for the degree program standards (4 and 5), and the necessary resources for student formation, library and information services (6), and student services (7). All the standards are woven together to support each school's priority on student learning and formation.

Mission and religious identity

Each school should fulfill the standards and demonstrate their effectiveness in ways that are consistent with the school's mission and religious identity. This theme threads through the *Standards*, privileging each school's "unique mission and distinctive theological commitments." (*Preamble to Standards of Accreditation, B*)

Dimensions: intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational

While schools have attended to all four of these dimensions to varying degrees, the emphasis has nearly always been on intellectual and vocational formation. Schools formerly could assume that human and spiritual dimensions had been addressed through ecologies of preparation including the family, youth groups, high schools, and undergraduate schools. Those institutions have declined in strength or focus in recent decades, leaving graduate theological schools with the need to give spiritual and human formation greater attention. The 2020 *Standards* require schools to address all four dimensions, as appropriate for particular degree programs. The terms are intentionally left undefined. They point to areas of formation that must be addressed, but the language describing the dimensions may differ according to different theological traditions and ecclesial practices.

Academic rigor, intercultural competency, global awareness and engagement, and lifelong learning

Standards 3.2 through 3.5 identify four membership-shared emphases that were identified through the redevelopment task force's process of gathering information. They appear throughout the *Standards*.

Educational modalities and policies

Standards 3.6 through 3.10 deal with educational modalities. The 2020 *Standards* are described as “modality neutral”—there is no assumed normative educational modality against which variations are to be measured. Instead, all modalities must manifest various markers of educational quality and demonstrate that the student learning outcomes for each degree are being achieved. The 2020 *Standards* also removed residency requirements for all degrees except the PhD/ThD. Standards 3.11 through 3.15 deal with policies supporting student learning and formation. In response to membership feedback and in support of greater flexibility, a significant difference in the 2020 *Standards* compared to previous versions is the greater proportion of degree programs that may be covered by advanced standing (one-third vs. one-fourth of a program), and the greater proportion of

shared credits allowed (from a maximum of one-half to as much as two-thirds of the degree receiving those credits).

At the end of *Beyond Profession*, Aleshire summarizes his reflections on “formational theological education.” “The future needs more theological education, not less. It needs all the study of text and tradition that the current model has provided, and it needs all the skills that are currently being taught and then some. But it needs more than that. It needs practices that cultivate moral maturity, relational integrity, and spiritual maturity, and when that is done well, it makes for a different kind of theological education.” (p. 139)

In Standard 3, the ATS membership widely affirmed those reflections and the expectation that all schools give attention in their own distinctive ways to intellectual, human, vocational, and spiritual formation.



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