



Commission on Accreditation

Standards of Accreditation

Amended October 7, 2021

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Introduction

History, Mission, and Core Values

The Association of Reformed Theological Seminaries (ARTS) was created in 1999 to meet the need for a professional and accrediting organization dedicated to Reformed theological education. ARTS, through its independent standing commission the ARTS Commission on Accreditation accredits institutions granting graduate degrees, at the master and doctoral levels, in ministry-related fields.

The mission of ARTS is to preserve and advance the academic quality, accountability, and improvement of institutions committed to educating students in the tenets of Reformed Theology.

The core value of ARTS is to bring glory to God, contribute to the building of the Church and progress of God's Kingdom, and preserve and advance the Reformed tradition by providing a context in which the Association, the Association's Commission on Accreditation, and member institutions can hold one another accountable for fulfilling their individual purposes and commitments.

Scope of Accreditation

ARTS Commission on Accreditation accredits United States based institutions and other locations as determined by the Commission on Accreditation, which offers baccalaureate and/or graduate degrees in fields aimed at preparing students for Christian service and ministry through biblical and theological studies of Reformed traditions.

Philosophy of Accreditation

ARTS accomplishes its mission through the accreditation activities of the Association of Reformed Theological Seminaries Commission on Accreditation (ARTS-COA or Commission) and the programs and services offered to its member institutions.

These Standards of Accreditation are the basis upon which accreditation decisions are made by the ARTS-COA. They are intended to assure that institutions accredited by the Commission are marked by high quality, accountability, and appropriate improvement. ARTS-COA accredited schools gladly submit to these Standards, knowing they are held to an even higher standard by the Lord, and to one another and those they serve, in order to "spur one another to love and good works."

It is not the intention of ARTS-COA to establish rigid standards that would unduly restrict the ability of an institution to fulfill its particular mission. Rather, schools are encouraged to develop internal standards and policies which satisfy these Standards consistently with the institution's unique circumstance and calling.

The Commission accredits Reformed theological seminaries based in the United States, which offer graduate degrees, at the master and doctoral levels, in ministry-related fields and which satisfy these Standards.

The focus on institutional effectiveness reflected in these Standards underscores the seriousness of the educational enterprise upon which ARTS accredited institutions have embarked. Institutions accredited by the Commission are engaged in Christian graduate theological education intended to equip pastors, teachers and lay leaders to proclaim Christ and make disciples of all nations. Institutions accredited by the Commission pursue institutional effectiveness in part to satisfy these Standards, but primarily because the outcomes of their educational programs have incalculable significance in and beyond this life.

Conditions of Eligibility

The ARTS-COA will grant applicant status to those institutions that (1) document compliance with the below Conditions of Eligibility and (2) appear, in the committee's judgment, to be able to achieve accredited membership status within a maximum of three years.

To be considered for applicant status, an institution must provide the ARTS-COA with (1) an official statement from its chief executive officer reflecting a decision of its board of control to pursue accreditation, (2) a completed application form, (3) an official statement from the chief executive officer reflecting a board of control decision to affirm the ARTS Tenets of Faith, and (4) a document indicating compliance with the following Conditions of Eligibility.

1. Authorization

An institution must have authorization from the appropriate governmental agency in their jurisdiction (if required) to operate as an educational institution and to grant all degrees, certificates, and diplomas that it awards.

2. Statement of Faith

An institution must affirm, and make known in its controlling documents, its adherence to the ARTS Tenets of Faith (found in Article II, Section 4, Page 1 of the ARTS Constitution).

3. Mission

An institution must have a clear statement of its mission as well as formally adopted and widely publicized institutional goals that are in accord with the Association's objectives.

4. Operational Experience

An institution must have been in operation for a minimum of three years, with a record of graduating students.

5. Governance

An institution must have a governing board that has the authority to direct, oversee, and carry out the mission, goals, and objectives of the institution. ARTS-COA recognizes that various institutional governance models can be employed. As such, ARTS-COA only requires that the institution clearly documents how it ensures board and administration accountability, eliminates conflicts of interest, and protects the mission and vision of the institution.

6. Chief executive officer

An institution must have a chief executive officer who possesses the authority and responsibility to manage the operations of the institution.

7. Academic Programs

An institution must offer and have graduated at least one class of students with graduate level seminary degrees for each of its programs that are in accord with its mission and demonstrate its academic affinity with the mission of ARTS.

8. Financial Viability

An institution must be able to document an audited or reviewed financial statement that covers its three most recent fiscal years indicating it is financially sound and can meet its financial obligations of providing instruction and service to its students.

Foundational Characteristics (Standard 1)

The institution's foundational characteristics set the basis by which all programs, degrees, and courses are offered. The foundational characteristics establish the biblical principles, mission, and objectives of the institution. Furthermore, these characteristics serve to guide the institution in satisfying its mission of training students for work in Christian ministry.

Standard 1 Mission & Objectives

The institution must have a clearly stated mission or purpose statement, which has been formally approved by the institution's governing body and which is consistent with a focus on quality and meaningful graduate Christian education. All of the institution's activities and policies must be guided by or serve the mission or purpose statement. Institutional objectives and goals are intended to facilitate fulfillment of the mission or purpose statement. The institution must also demonstrate that it adheres to one or more of the historic creeds of the Reformed tradition.

Essential Standards:

1. The governing body of the institution has adopted a clearly stated mission or purpose statement, which is contained in appropriate institutional publications, such as its catalog, website, and student handbook.
2. The institution shall articulate, as appropriate, its views, purposes, convictions, and other educational, ministerial, theological, philosophical, and institutional distinctives, including a commitment to helping students develop in personal piety, intellectual understanding, and ministerial/Christian service skills.
3. The institution demonstrates adherence to one or more of the historic creeds of the Reformed tradition: the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the First or Second Helvetic Confessions, and/or the Second London Confession of 1689.
4. The institution's creedal identity shall be communicated in appropriate institutional publications and shall serve as the foundation upon which all institutional programs of instruction are developed and offered.
5. The institution shall develop and regularly review its goals and objectives in light of its institutional mission or purpose and demonstrate its commitment to the overall goal of achieving institutional effectiveness as evidenced by academic quality.
6. Institutional goals and objectives shall be communicated within the institution and made available to the public.

Recommendations for Consideration:

1. The governing body of the institution is encouraged to review its mission or purpose statement periodically to ensure that it accurately reflects the unique calling of the institution. Furthermore, the institution's governing board is encouraged to develop and review annually a multi-year strategic plan, which articulates how its mission and goals are and will be satisfied.
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Advancing Academic Quality (Standards 2 through 6)

The institution's academic programs, policies, institutional resources, faculty, and administration are designed to promote and are focused upon the achievement of institutional effectiveness as evidenced by academic quality. While not all areas are strictly "academic" in orientation, every component of the institution exists to serve the goal of academic quality. In these Standards, "academic quality" refers to results associated with teaching, learning, research, personal growth, and service within the framework of institutional mission and vision. The institution regularly assesses student learning to determine how well it is achieving its mission of teaching and training for ministry.

Standard 2 Academic Programs

The institution's academic programs must further the institutional mission or purpose and must reflect the institution's objective of advancing academic quality. The institution must demonstrate that the academic degree programs and courses it offers equip students for vocational or lay Christian ministry and service.

Essential Standards:

1. Degree programs shall be defined according to: (a) title and academic credits to be awarded; (b) summary of program content and relationship to institutional mission or purpose; (c) statement of desired program outcomes; and (d) applicability to vocational ministry and service. This information must be made publicly available.
2. Degree programs shall be of the academic quality designed to promote student learning, equip the student to be a thoughtful and diligent learner, develop the student's ability to communicate what they have learned, and prepare the student intellectually and spiritually for Christian ministry and service at the vocational or lay level. Advanced programs shall build upon knowledge and skills obtained by the student in basic courses.
3. Program courses shall inform the student of the: (a) intellectual content as determined by the demands of the program and the area of instruction; (b) specific instructional content, learning activities, and means of assessment to address the spiritual and affective needs of learners; and (c) personal piety, behavioral, or skill outcomes appropriate to course content and the student's instructional program.
4. The institution shall establish minimum standards of learning for its programs consistent with the academic quality of graduate higher education offered by theological seminaries.
5. A process of regular review by the institution to ensure that curricular objectives for each academic program are being realized.

6. The institution's academic programs shall help students develop in personal piety, intellectual understanding, and ministry skills; incorporating field education or relevant practicum and internship experiences as necessary.
7. The institution will have an advising and counseling program that guides the student from matriculation to graduation.
8. The institution, regardless of whether it uses a traditional classroom format, online studies, distance education (either alone or in cooperation with other institutions), competency-based assessments or blended delivery methods must ensure those studies yield graduate education that maintains educational integrity and that the institution provides appropriate administrative, quality academic instruction, resources, and support to the student. The institution shall present evidence that its forms of academic delivery a) further the accessibility of the institution's programs, b) are appropriate to higher education, c) are consistent with the institution's objectives, and d) are effective in achieving the intent of these standards.
9. The institution will have a system of grading or assessments and associated policies and procedures that reflects integrity, ensures fairness and consistency, conforms to higher education norms, and facilitates transportability of students' academic credits.

Recommendations for consideration:

1. The institution is encouraged to set ambitious student learning goals as a key outcome of its degree programs and courses.
 2. The institution is encouraged to make use of a wide variety of methods of delivering academic programs, including classroom, online, distance, blended, competencies, life-experiences, and apprentice/internships, provided the institution demonstrates that these methods serve the institution's mission or purpose and are consistent with a focus on quality graduate Christian education.
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Standard 3

Institutional and Learning Resources

The institution must demonstrate that it has sufficient resources to accomplish the institutional mission or purpose and advance academic quality.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution shall demonstrate that it has sufficient financial resources to deliver its academic programs and essential student services, whether through student tuition, a program of institutional development, financial reserves or a combination of these.
2. The institution shall demonstrate a history of financial management consistent with biblical principles of wise stewardship and integrity.
3. The institution must have sufficient administrative support and faculty resources to deliver quality academic programs and essential student services.
4. The institution must have the necessary academic and administrative capabilities required to deliver quality academic programs and essential student services.
5. The institution must have access to, or make available, the required library/learning/research resources that meet the needs and demands of its academic programs for all of the delivery methods it employs.
6. The institution must utilize risk management practices and insurance to protect institutional resources, records, and programs.

Recommendations for consideration:

1. The institution may want to consider making use of the expanding trend in online library sharing, online material, and research tools and resources, as well as cooperative resource sharing with other ARTS institutions.
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Standard 4 Administration

The institution shall demonstrate that its administrative capabilities support the provision of quality academic programs and provide essential student services.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution must have a chief executive officer (whether the president or another), whose is responsible to the institution and the board for leading the institution toward the accomplishment of its mission.
 2. The institution must have administrative capabilities to support the needs of its academic programs and student services. These include items such as recordkeeping, payroll, grading, communication, admissions, enrollment, etc.
 3. The institution must have an administrative structure, sufficient to accomplish its administrative tasks.
 4. The institution's administration must have its duties, functions, responsibilities, and relationship to the governing board clearly articulated in the institution's governing documents.
 5. The institution must maintain complete, accurate, and securely maintained administrative and student records.
 6. The institution must have a process for review and enhancement of the performance of its administrative capabilities.
 7. The institution must document its expectations, requirements, and restrictions of the administrative capabilities through published manuals, as appropriate.
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Standard 5 Faculty

The institution maintains faculty resources committed to its mission and qualified academically and spiritually to facilitate student learning and to contribute to the development of the institution. The institution fosters an academic climate, encourages professional development, and promotes the well-being of faculty.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution must have faculty resources with appropriate qualifications and expertise, experience in Church leadership, and demonstrated ability to teach at the graduate level in a Christian institution.
 2. The institution must conduct regular evaluations of each faculty's ability to advance student learning.
 3. The institution must have a program for improving the pedagogical effectiveness of all faculty.
 4. The institution must demonstrate evidence of faculty contribution to student learning.
 5. The institution must have the ability to provide support and encouragement for continuing faculty development.
 6. The institution has a program for faculty involvement in academic related decision-making processes, especially as they relate to admissions criteria, curriculum, student life, and graduation requirements.
 7. The institution must require that faculty (full-time, adjunct, or visiting) affirm in writing their agreement with the institution's mission or purpose, doctrinal position, terms of employment, and any other faculty requirements.
 8. The institution must communicate its expectation, requirement, and restrictions to the faculty through published personnel manuals and/or faculty manuals, as appropriate.
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Standard 6

Assessing Student Learning

Institutional effectiveness is indicated by the institution's progress in maintaining and advancing academic quality. The institution shall develop standards of academic quality and means to determine whether those standards have been met, with a specific focus on assessing student learning and ability to serve in Christian ministry.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution must promulgate its standards of academic quality and desired learning outcomes to all of the institution's academic programs, degrees, and courses.
 2. The institution must develop processes or tools to measure student achievement relative to standards of academic quality and preparedness for Christian ministry/service, which are both quantitative and qualitative.
 3. The institution must evaluate the indicators of student achievement resulting from the processes or tools used to measure student achievement relative to standards of academic quality and desired learning outcomes.
 4. The institution must evaluate both its standards and processes annually to determine whether they are effective in assessing student learning.
 5. The institution must develop a process by which its evaluations are incorporated back into its programs, degrees, and courses to ensure continual improvement of teaching and learning.
 6. The institution must have an ongoing provision for the dissemination of reliable information to the public regarding student achievement, including graduation rates, and when appropriate ordination and employment rates.
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Accountability (Standards 7 through 8)

The institution's governance, financial activities, and communications reflect biblical integrity. The institution values the accountability provided through ARTS-COA accreditation, the Commission, and fellow member institutions. The institution shall take steps to increase public awareness and confidence in the institution and its programs.

Standard 7 Governance & Authority

The institution is authorized to operate as an educational institution and grant degrees in its state. The institution is governed by a board with the legal authority and fiduciary duty to oversee the operations of the institution and its personnel.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution must demonstrate that it has the legal authority to operate as an educational institution in its state, including the authority to offer classes, grant academic credit and award graduate degrees.
2. The institution must describe in detail and document its status as an independent nonprofit corporation, ecclesiastical commission, denominational agency, or other entity, including an explanation of the relationship and lines of authority associated with any status other than that of an independent nonprofit corporation.
3. The institution must have a governing board with the legal authority and fiduciary responsibility for overseeing all activities of the institution.
4. The institution must have articles of incorporation, bylaws, or similar foundational documents establishing the institution, setting forth the institution's purpose, creating the governing board, and establishing the governing board's operational procedures.
5. Governing board membership must reflect the institution's constituencies, and members must not have a significant conflict of interest relevant to their service as board members.
6. The institution must have a board manual containing policies, procedures, and guidance for the governing board and its members.
7. The governing board must have a process for evaluating its performance and the performance of individual board members.

8. The institution must clearly document how it ensures board and administration accountability, eliminates conflicts of interest, and protects the mission and vision of the institution.
 9. The governing board must have a chief executive officer who reports to the governing board and is responsible for leading the institution toward achievement of its purpose or mission.
 10. The institution must have in place succession plans for dealing with personnel vacancies critical to its operations.
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Standard 8

Institutional Integrity & Communication

The institution shall, in all of its operations and communications, have and display biblical integrity, evidenced by honesty, forthrightness, and fairness.

Essential Standards:

1. Institutional publications, including website information, shall be truthful, clear, and accurate.
2. Institutional communications focused on development and student recruitment shall be truthful, clear, and accurate.
3. The institution shall develop and implement a plan for increasing public awareness about the institution and its programs.
4. The institution shall publish and make publicly available a student handbook containing institutional policies and procedures applicable to students, addressing such issues as admission, tuition and fees, grading, the grievance and appeals processes for adverse academic or other decisions, credit transfers, graduation, non-discrimination, international students, financial aid and scholarships, class attendance, applicable degree requirements, and withdrawal.
5. The institution shall publish and make publicly available an academic catalog describing degree programs and course descriptions, clearly indicating effective dates for degree requirements contained in the catalog.
6. The institution, while protecting confidential student information from disclosure, provides appropriate information to the public about its academic quality and student achievement. This information must be kept current and updated regularly.
7. The institution shall include on its website, social media, and any other appropriate publication an explanation of accreditation and the dangers of diploma and accreditation mills.
8. The institution shall have an independent accountant or otherwise prepared and reviewed annual audit, review, or financial compilation, which shall be available to any person upon request.
9. Institutions required to prepare and file Form 990 annually with the Internal Revenue Service shall make it available to any person upon request.

10. The institution must have a policy for the resolution of internal or external conflicts which is consistent with biblical principles of conflict resolution.
 11. The institution will have an organizational climate, patterned after biblical principles that encourage job satisfaction, development, and the respectful handling of all personnel decisions.
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Student and Enrollment Services (Standards 9 through 10)

The institution provides services that contribute to the development and care of students and that are appropriate to the level of education offered. Accompanying these services, the institution has developed and implemented enrollment services and management plans that are consistent with its mission and addresses issues of recruitment, admissions, financial support, and retention.

Standard 9 Student Services

The institution shall provide services to ensure the student has the support and services required to succeed in the learning objectives of the academic programs.

Essential Standards:

1. A commitment to foster and guide students in their spiritual and intellectual development, as well as their career aspirations.
 2. The institution has the organization and ability to deliver student services that are appropriately aligned with the institution's mission, and can demonstrate that they support the needs of its students.
 3. A regular system of assessing needs, experiences, and levels of student satisfaction in order to improve services.
 4. Opportunities for students to provide input into institutional decision-making.
 5. Published procedures for and records of addressing student complaints and grievances.
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Standard 10 **Enrollment Services**

The institution shall provide enrollment services to ensure the smooth operation and dissemination of information and services pertaining to recruitment, admissions, enrollment, financial support, retention, and graduation.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution has recruitment strategies and procedures that identify students whose spiritual commitment, goals, preparedness, and interests are consistent with the institution's mission. These strategies shall enable prospective students to make informed decisions.
2. The institution has admissions requirements and procedures that are clearly communicated to prospective students and applied consistently in the admissions process.
3. The institution has published policies and procedures relating to transfer credits, prior learning, life experiences, and competency-based education, including public disclosure of criteria used to evaluate credits, and minimum (if campus based education is used) residency requirements for graduation.
4. The institution makes available to students and prospective students financial support information and services.
5. The institution has resources and services sufficient to address the needs of academically at-risk students, support the development of services to improve student retention, and a functioning assessment process that measures student retention, attrition, completion rates, and stimulates improvement.

Improvements (Standard 11)

The institution strives to improve all of its programs and services, recognizing that it exists to equip students to proclaim Christ and make disciples of all people. Improvements are necessarily tied to student learning or achievement, evidenced not only by current student learning but also by the ability of graduates to be effective in ministry and service.

Standard 11 Making Appropriate Improvements

The institution is intentional in evaluating institutional effectiveness, developing plans to increase institutional effectiveness, and implementing appropriate improvements. The chief measure of institutional effectiveness is student learning or achievement, though improvements in areas not typically considered academic in orientation serve the overall goal of institutional effectiveness. Improvements are required when academic quality is insufficient; improvements are recommended whenever there is room for increased institutional effectiveness.

Essential Standards:

1. The institution must demonstrate that it has a process for developing plans to increase institutional effectiveness in response to indicators of student achievement obtained from the processes or tools used to measure same.
 2. The institution's planning process must focus on improving student learning and on efficient use of institutional resources.
 3. The institution must regularly evaluate whether institutional resources are sufficient to accomplish the mission or purpose and whether existing institutional resources are allocated efficiently.
 4. The institution must address any identified resource deficits in its planning process.
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