



STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

We believe that quality is essential if the educational journey we provide is going to have the transforming impact on students, churches, communities, nations, and God's Kingdom, that we believe God desires it to have.

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STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: INTRO

When people talk to us about the Kairos Project, one of their first questions is about quality. More specifically, how do we ensure quality when we don't require so many of the traditional aspects of education that have been required for the explicit purpose of securing and maintaining quality in education? Not only is that our most frequent question, it is one of the most important questions we are asked when we began.

We believe that quality is essential if the educational journey we provide is going to have the transforming impact on students, churches, communities, nations, and God's Kingdom, that we believe God desires it to have. This, of course, invites us to dig deeper into what we mean by quality and the standards of excellence one might use to identify and promote that kind of education. For the next little while we are going to engage these questions. We will look into some of the standards that have traditionally shaped theological education as well as how the Kairos Project maintains but also transforms them in order to do better what we all want and need theological education to do.

There has been so much written about educational quality that we could not possibly engage much of that conversation here. What I want to do is to help us become more aware of important dimensions of standards of excellence to better understand why we have done things the way we have. Throughout this white paper, I am going to make a few observations that are sometimes overlooked or, at least, not adequately accounted for in traditional educational practices. Perhaps I will name things that you are already familiar with; perhaps some of this will be new to you. Either way, by attending to these observations, I think we will better understand the educational journey of Kairos and why we think it is even better than what we have been providing before. (For those interested, several of these observations are heavily dependent on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984.) [Back to top.](#)

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: CONTEXT

The first observation I want to make has to do with context. Standards of excellence are contextual. In recent years, we have become more and more aware of the significance of context. The things that traditionally have been understood by many as being non-contextual are being shown to be inherently contextual. To put it simply, we are discovering that context matters. Context matters greatly. Context matters greatly for everything. This is true in every dimension of our lives and that's becoming clearer to us every day. I want to explore why it matters in thinking about education.

When I was growing up in Texas, we had a colloquialism that we used to characterize anyone who had made a really bad shot. We said that they had “missed by a mile.” It didn’t matter if one was throwing a baseball, shooting baskets in basketball, or target shooting at the rifle range, “missing by a mile” meant you were a really bad shot. Sometimes in class, I ask students if they were aiming at a target but “missed by a mile,” if their aim had been accurate? After some discussion they come to see that the best answer one can give in the abstract is “it depends.” It depends on the context.

Let me illustrate how this is so. If I was shooting at a target 100 yards away, but it missed the target by 5 feet, you would judge my aim as inaccurate. It was a bad shot. But if you were sending a spacecraft 240,000 miles into space and missed the landing spot on the moon by 5 feet that would be characterized as amazingly accurate. Whether or not missing a target by 5 feet is judged to be ‘accurate’ depends on the context. Accuracy as a standard by which we judge something is always a contextual judgement.

I say this to raise awareness of the fact that every standard we use presupposes some context for it to be meaningful. Whether we recognize it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, there is an assumed context in which the judgement is being made. That is simply the way things are. As I say, this is hardly new stuff. Missiologists have been trying to bring it to our attention for decades. That’s one reason I have often characterized the Kairos Project as shifting toward a Missiological philosophy of education. One simply can’t avoid the contextual nature of our judgments, and we need to stop making it appear as if we can. [Back to top](#).

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: COMMUNITY

Standards emerge from communities which are involved in a common practice moving toward a particular end. The “community of practitioners” both create and are governed by these standards. Think about it this way, who is it that sets the standards for good medicine? Doctors do. Doctors determine what medical care leads to health and which doesn’t. Then they are held accountable to those standards in the care they provide. Who is it that sets the standards for being a good lawyer? Lawyers do. Who is it that sets the standards for good therapy? Therapists do. That’s one reason peer-review is so important. Standards emerge out of and govern the community of practitioners.

Now, we shouldn’t think that these standards are determined solely by the community of practitioners, they are not. There are more aspects than just the community of practitioners but that community is inherently related to the standards. And, the standards are not arbitrary. They are arrived at by reason with rigor and care. Another dimension we shouldn’t miss is that these standards are created by the community to help the practitioners arrive at the result the practice is striving to achieve. It is important to recognize that practices are always moving toward an end or goal. That is, there’s a purpose for why the community does what it does.

Recognizing the communal dimension of our standards of excellence is important because our participation in these communities deeply impacts our lives. We all participate in a variety of different communal practices and attending to them more intentionally can give us critical leverage over forces that shape us. In our white paper on Romans, we talked about the way culture shapes us, molds us, forms us into particular types of people often through habits and patterns of behaviours to which we pay very little attention. Our participation in these communities of practice do the same thing. Though often unseen, their power is real and permeates many aspects of our lives. Later, we will pay particular attention to the way the practice of education forms us.

Recognizing that practices always strive toward a particular end helps us recognize the ways in which the activities, skills, habits, and even the language we use in the practice are in service to that end. It is only when we know what we are trying to do that we can assess whether or not we are doing it. Thus, recognizing what we are trying to do is essential in developing the appropriate standards of excellence for hitting our target.

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STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE: CHANGE

Standards of excellence aren't static; standards of excellence change. This might sound strange at first. Many of us were taught to believe that if standards change then they can't really be binding and must be essentially arbitrary. But this isn't true.

A stark illustration of this is from when I was younger and is related to my family's experiences of the practice of medicine. My brother struggled with asthma. I remember many occasions when something would set off a quite serious asthma attack. He would find it harder and harder to get a deep breath. Sometimes, he had to work so hard to inhale that it was painful just watching and listening to him trying to get a breath. I remember our mother bringing him home from the doctor after a very serious bout with asthma. She remarked that the doctor had told her if we were away from home without his inhaler and he was really having difficulty breathing that she could give him a drag on her cigarette to help open up his lungs.

Before we get too critical of our family doctor, you have to remember this was back in the 1960s when the dangers of cigarette smoking weren't medically acknowledged (whether or not they were known is disputed). For many people, cigarette smoking was a pretty normal part of life. The world has changed a lot since then. Now the harmful effects of cigarette smoking are so well accepted that any doctor telling a patient to take a drag from a cigarette to ease their difficulty of breathing during a fit of asthma might be subject to malpractice. You might suspect that our doctor wasn't a very good doctor back then, but he certainly wouldn't measure up today.

Most of us have experienced this kind of change in medical standards. I am a bit of a “foodie.” In talking about food, I often hear people complain about “not being able to keep up” with the latest medical advice on whether it is healthy to eat this or that food. Research changes our understanding of how food impacts us, so if we want to “eat healthy” we have to keep up with the research. One frustration my wife and I have had in this regard is that many doctors don’t keep up with the research. The advice we hear friends being given by their doctors about how to eat is sometimes shocking to us.

These are all the illustrations of the contingency of medical standards of excellence. As medical knowledge grows so does our conception of health, the standards for what we need to do to be healthy, and what it means to be a good doctor. These standards change but that doesn’t mean that they aren’t binding. After all, doctors can lose their license by violating applicable standards of good medicine even as those standards change over time.

So, I hope it is clear that standards can be binding even though we recognize them to be contextual, communal, and contingent. The importance of these observations can hardly be overstated. Next, we will explore the implications that these observations have on the Kairos Project. This is, perhaps, the most important practice in which we participate as the Kairos Project. [Back to top.](#)

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEXT, COMMUNITY & CONTINGENCY, PART ONE

When we talk about being “educators” we should recognize that we are already situated in a particular community of practitioners. This community has a history in which the standards that govern the practice have changed as we learn better how to do what it is that we are attempting to do. The practice of education exerts a profoundly formative influence on everyone involved, whether we are aware of it or not. We want to become aware of it so that we can better achieve the ends we are striving toward and to faithfully live into our calling as educators.

We now live in a context in which knowledge is no longer scarce. Recognizing that reality forces us to ask, if schools aren’t primarily in the business of providing information to those who wouldn’t have access to it otherwise, then what are we doing? What is our *raison d’être*, our reason for being? Why do we exist? The importance of answering this question simply can’t be overstated. The answers we provide to these make the

Kairos Project what it is. Some of the deepest changes embodied in the Kairos Project center around our fundamental understanding of knowledge. In the west, we have tended to identify knowledge with content. If you listen, you'll see they're virtually synonymous in our language. We may bristle when we say it that way but it's clearly embedded in our practice. We treat knowledge as if it is essentially content, and then act under the assumption that the more we get the better off we are. The problem with this reductionist approach to knowledge is that it strips away other essential aspects of knowledge.

One sign that something was missing in our attempts to educate students came when there appeared to be little correlation between success in the classroom and success in ministry. The unfortunate reality was that success in the classroom simply wasn't a predictor of success in ministry. Doing well in ministry (or doing poorly) in ministry had too little connection with doing well (or poorly) in school. One thing that often was missing was a connection between what was being learned in the classroom and one's ministry context. We often heard that what was needed for ministry wasn't being taught in seminary. Too often there was also the perception that what was being taught wasn't really what was needed or even had a detrimental effect in ministry. [Back to top.](#)

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEXT, COMMUNITY & CONTINGENCY, PART TWO

As we reflected on the implications of context, community, and contingency, we uncovered that doing well (or poorly) in ministry had little connection to doing well (or poorly) in school. There was a perception that what was being taught wasn't really what was needed for ministry and that, sometimes, it could even have a detrimental effect in ministry.

A typical response by many schools was to add "practical ministry" courses, "field education" programs, or "internships" to the curriculum. This helped in some ways but created problems in others. To address lingering problems, faculty eventually even began allowing students to adjust particular course assignments to be better directed toward their ministry needs and context. But the impact was still not enough. We continued to hear complaints that seminary education was not "relevant" or "applicable" to the ministry needs of the church.

But other complaints arose as well. Sometimes what was identified as being missing was the positive impact of the education on the student's personal life. Students could learn everything being taught in class but it didn't transform their lives in the way schools thought it should or that our church communities wanted it to. We often hear this complaint as education being too focused on the "head" and not enough on the "heart."

This was even compounded by students going to seminary and losing the fervor of the faith they had entered with. You have probably heard that old “slip of the tongue” that someone going to school was attending “cemetery.” To address these issues, we began paying attention to the integration of what was being learned in class with the life of the student. Again, we added things to the curriculum, developed mentoring programs, and intensified efforts on other extra curricular activities. Also, we tweaked course assignments to help the course material impact the whole life of the student. This culminated in what we now call “spiritual formation.” All of this was done in growing recognition of the fact that education must transform the student’s “way of life” as well as their “way of thinking.”

As good as all these adjustments were, they simply did not help enough. The understanding of knowledge that was driving the academy made “spiritual formation” and “field education” programs “add-ons” to the real “education” which focused on the content delivered in the classroom. In the Kairos Project, we don’t believe that formation nor field education are “add ons” to the more essential dimension of content. We reject this sort of reductionism and embrace a holistic understanding of knowing which requires all three dimensions. [Back to top.](#)
