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Online and on campus

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary is developing a hybrid model of theological education using technology and on-campus instruction to engage students in new ways.

by [Ned Barnett](#)



Photo courtesy Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

The campus at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte, N.C.

January 19, 2010

As president of [Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary](#) in South Hamilton, Mass., [Robert E. Cooley](#) took a surprising approach when the school opened a satellite campus in Charlotte, N.C., in 1991. To make it possible for more students to go to the school, he decided the school would go to the students.

The strategy: Focus on non-traditional education for working adults. Students would come to class on weekends or at night. During the week they could continue their studies at home, meeting with groups of students in their area. The aim was to shape a seminary education around the lives and jobs of adult students.

Now the wider reach in theological education pioneered at GCTS-Charlotte is about to be extended beyond its corner of the Southeast to students around the country and the world. The new goal is to reach adults who couldn't obtain formal theological training because they were either too far from a seminary or too busy with ministry or other work.

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The seminary will do that by using new communication technology to transmit Gordon-Conwell's tradition of theological education, said Joel Harlow, an adjunct professor of biblical languages at GCTS-Charlotte and a veteran in distance education.

"We don't intend to do anything radically different than what we're doing now, but we want to do it better and smarter and do it for more people," Harlow said.

GCTS-Charlotte is making the evolution through a pilot project supported by a \$500,000 matching grant from the [Kern Family Foundation](#) of Waukesha, Wis. The grant was one of six the foundation gave to theological schools in early 2009 under a program called "Leading Through Change: Innovation in Theological Schools."

At GCTS-Charlotte, the innovation will combine Internet-based communication with a concentrated residential component to create something educators call "hybrid" distance education. The hybrid version will require students to be on campus only two or three weeks a year. That will expand the potential student body from those close enough to commute monthly to anyone who can get to Charlotte for a few weeks annually.

"We're not proposing that people never come to our campus. This is not a University of Phoenix model," Harlow said. "This will be akin to a doctorate of ministry model in which students spend two weeks every year on campus and then work in subgroups in their area."

Tutoring on steroids

The technical side of connecting new technology to a new approach to teaching at GCTS-Charlotte will be handled by Harlow. Prior to returning to GCTS-Charlotte to teach -- he earned his master's of theological studies there in 1993 -- Harlow taught for nine years at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, where he specialized in online education. Over the years, he has taught nearly 1,000 online Greek and Hebrew students from around the world.

The new generation of distance learning will take advantage of technology not just to make theological education more accessible, but also to engage students in new ways, he said. Harlow said the new kind of online education contemplated at GCTS-Charlotte will change the methods of teaching and the tempo of learning.

In a traditional class, Harlow said, a teacher might give a 15-minute introduction to Martin Luther and students would take notes and try to absorb the information. In an online class, he said, students can replay the introduction until they fully understand it.

"Traditionally, the student got one shot at grasping that information," Harlow said. "This way the students can go back and look at it 30 times if they want."

Online classes allow students to learn at their own pace and better prepare them when they do meet in a classroom. Instead of hearing new material there, students work through content they've already seen and reviewed, Harlow said.

"In class we do problem-solving instead of lecturing," Harlow said. "It's a tutoring session on steroids."

A new approach to online theological education would appeal to Nic Uebel. He's commuting twice a month from Blacksburg, Va., to Charlotte as he pursues a master's degree in biblical studies at GCTS-Charlotte. The drive is three hours each way.

"I think it would definitely be helpful. Obviously driving down there isn't my favorite thing, especially being away from my home and my wife once or twice a month," said Uebel, 27, who holds a degree in computer engineering from Virginia Tech. Uebel recently returned to his alma mater to work in the Baptist Collegiate Ministries program there.

That approach would work for Uebel, who said he appreciates the direct contact he has with professors during his weekends on campus. Even if the school didn't require his presence, he said he would have gone anyway in his first year to develop a sense of the school and his teachers.

"That's something I really have valued this semester, to hear them talk about their life and what they have done in ministry," he said.

GCTS-Charlotte hopes to find a way to offer students far beyond Uebel's commuting range a combination of rapid and easy Internet access to classes, discussions and videos, limited commuting and a concentrated period of onsite contact with teachers.

So reaching out online won't mean a complete separation from campus. For one, the seminary's accrediting agency, the Association of Theological Schools, won't allow advanced degrees in programs that are completely online.

Cooley, the lead consultant to the Kern Family Foundation as it evaluated proposals, said the application of new technology in theological education must be accompanied by a new emphasis on the human role in teaching. Students will be more involved with tutors and mentors, he said, and some churches may also be places to learn while doing.

"Maybe the medical field offers a model in teaching hospitals. Maybe we need to have teaching churches," he said. "There are just some things that technology cannot give you, just as the classroom cannot give you certain things."

Building on a foundation

GCTS-Charlotte already has an established distance education program serving students of various ages and life situations. Some are fresh out of college and interested in becoming ministers. Some are already pastors and missionaries seeking advanced degrees. Others are in the middle of secular careers, but have decided to become pastors. Now Harlow wants to build on that foundation by introducing web education methods already in use at universities and in continuing education for professionals.

"What we're hoping to do in the Kern grant is not new in education in general, but it's cutting-edge in theological education," he said.

The changes planned at GCTS-Charlotte mirror what is already happening in distance education in other fields. Duke University's [Fuqua School of Business](#), for instance, offers a hybrid model for two MBA programs. The oldest, the [Global Executive MBA](#), started in 1996. Today it includes 85 students from 23 different countries. They spend a concentrated period on campus and do the rest of their work over the Internet.

John Gallagher, associate dean of executive MBA programs at Fuqua, has been involved in Fuqua's web-based executive programs since 1996. He said the field is being transformed now by expanded bandwidth and wider Internet access that allows for faster and wider conferencing.

"Now we can hold meetings with 75 people very reliably," Gallagher said. "We could not do that in 1996 because everyone was using a dial-up modem."

This change allows for classes as geographically diverse as the world itself, Gallagher said. And that provides a richer learning environment in classes that focus on ideas and ways of thinking, he said.

"One real advantage of this approach is that you can assemble a cohort of students that otherwise you couldn't assemble on campus because of the geographical constraints," he said.

Understanding the market

At Gordon-Conwell a task force headed by Provost Frank James is exploring how to best apply the Kern funds to increase access to online education. First the school is having an outside firm conduct surveys to find out what potential students and religious organizations need and want from online instruction.

Amy Donovan, Gordon-Conwell's chief information officer and manager of the online project, said, "We are trying to understand the people who are interested: Who they are, where they are and what they're interested in."

Donovan said the survey results will be evaluated in the first quarter of 2010 and then the faculty will design new online courses. Under terms of the Kern grant, the new model must be in place by June 30, 2011.

Degrees that may be offered through the new hybrid program include a master's of divinity, a master's of arts in religion and a master's of arts in Christian leadership.

One potential group of students are pastors of independent megachurches who are not connected to denominational seminaries and are not required to have formal theological training. Another may be people in South and Central America who are flocking to Protestant evangelical churches.

As more people gain access to Gordon-Conwell, the school also gains access to a wider market, a significant issue for seminaries that are largely dependent on tuition. But Donovan said that, although more paying students would be a benefit, the emphasis is on expanding access to theological education rather than generating new revenue.

"This hasn't been based on costs, but rather on looking at what types of underserved markets there are," Donovan said. "If there were additional students that would be another revenue stream potentially, but the reasons behind it would not be primarily financial."

The new hybrid approach is consistent with Cooley's vision and builds on Gordon-Conwell's efforts to take education beyond the seminary's walls, Harlow said.

"The vision of Dr. Cooley is the idea that instead of students leaving everything they're doing to go to school that we come alongside them in their life," Harlow said. "They build community by coming here and then they remain in a community when they leave."