

# Southern Seminary brings distinct vision, innovation to Web-based education



By Aaron Cline Hanbury

In late April 2012, Stanford University president John Hennessy told a writer from *The New Yorker* that “there’s a tsunami coming” regarding online education. It seems the evolution that occurred in newspapers and magazines is about to happen in higher education: reorientation centered around the Internet.

The Babson Survey Research Group reports that from 2002 to 2010, the number of students enrolled in at least one online course increased by almost 300 percent. Far from slowing down, these numbers seem to indicate a growing demand for non-traditional education. Just recently, large and influential universities Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology invested millions of dollars in online courses and distance learning.

Hennessy’s words may prove prophetic, not only as momentum grows for innovative educational models, but also as expectations among students shift from a desk-and-chalkboard education to a learning experience without geography.

This shift is no less a reality among seminary-bound students.

“We’re living in a world in which probably the majority of persons called by God to gospel ministry will not be able to relocate,” said Timothy Paul Jones, associate vice president for online learning at Southern Seminary. “Online education provides an oppor-

tunity for those students to receive the training they need for the ministry they’re called to do without having to move their families.”

David Brooks, a columnist for *The New York Times*, suggests that this shift in education, like the digital revolution in print, will ultimately see the highest quality institutions capitalize on the opportunities it affords.

“The early Web radically democratized culture,” he writes, “but now in the media and elsewhere you’re seeing a flight to quality. The best American colleges should be able to establish a magnetic authoritative presence online. My guess is it will be easier to be a terrible university on the wide-open Web, but it will also be possible for the most committed schools and students to be better than ever.”

Better than ever is exactly what Jones and his team in the Office of Online Learning want to see from their new efforts in Internet-based education. According to Jones, who is also professor of leadership and church ministry, the seminary’s past and current Web presence fails to represent the quality that students expect. Moving forward, any online program at Southern Seminary must bear the excellence that marks the seminary’s on-campus experience.

“We must be aggressive in the pursuit of excellence without losing sight of who we are and the charge that we have from the churches of the South-

ern Baptist Convention,” Jones said. “We can’t lose sight of the unique, distinctive vision of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.”

Jones says that excellent online education will provide students “no less than what they receive on campus.” This means online students should be mentored by faculty and build relationships with peers — perhaps through phone calls, online forums or Skype meetings. And each facet of the Web experience must be high quality: creative videos, user-friendly learning management systems, efficient and thorough feedback.

But regardless of the quality and creativity, many educators and on-lookers like Brooks worry what a move away from desks and chalkboards could mean for genuine learning.

“The most important and paradoxical fact shaping the future of online learning is this: A brain is not a computer,” he writes. “We are not blank hard drives waiting to be filled with data. People learn from people they love and remember the things that arouse emotion.”

Earlier in his editorial, Brooks admits his hesitations: “Many of us view the coming change with trepidation. Will online learning diminish the face-to-face community that is the heart of the college experience? Will it elevate functional courses in business and marginalize subjects that are harder to digest in an online for-



mat, like philosophy? Will fast online browsing replace deep reading?"

In an article this past October in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rick Ostrander, provost of a Christian university, writes, "I see the potential to improve education with technology, but I worry about losing something in the process. ... Is the true value of higher education in danger of being lost in our rush to digitize the experience?"

Ostrander is not alone in his concern. Educators around the country emphasize the "personal element" of the educational experience, an element nearly impossible to replicate digitally.

This concern does not escape Jones.

"We recognize there are some things that can happen completely online, but we also recognize that there is a personal, face-to-face mentoring element of ministry training that cannot be replaced by an online component," he said.

Southern Seminary remains wholly committed to providing a full-orbed theological education. The school invests heavily in faculty members and the scholarship they produce. And a planned project to redesign the campus library illustrates the value the seminary places on the physical, geographical nature of learning.

The challenge for a 21st-century seminary like Southern is to integrate staple elements of the seminary experience — elements like personal accountability, vigorous debate and historical context

— into degree programs relevant to an academic reorientation around the Internet. Jones looks to the letters of the apostle Paul as a framework for distance learning. Often, Paul sends instruction to a congregation, but he always notes his plans to visit in person.

"First of all, Paul recognizes clearly that content can be delivered well through a virtual means — for him it was letters, for us maybe it's video," Jones said. "But Paul also recognized that virtual presence cannot replace personal presence. I think that we need to take that framework to online education and recognize that some things we can do effectively digitally, but, at the same time, there is a need to train and shape men and women for ministry through personal interaction."

So in fall 2012, Southern Seminary began offering select courses in a new, more flexible format called hybrid-modular courses. This "flipped classroom" format provides course content outside the classroom, and then dedicates in-person sessions to discussion, collaboration and application projects.

In a hybrid-modular course, students meet on campus in Louisville for six days at a time and earn up to 13 credit hours. Students arrive on a Wednesday afternoon and attend class meetings all day, each day through the following Wednesday, with the exception of Sunday. The current hybrid-modular format offers students four opportunities per

academic year to enroll in a six-day unit.

"The hybrid model has become one of our signatures," Jones said. "We bring together online and face-to-face. With the hybrid-modular courses, students receive content delivery online, but then discuss, apply and interact with course material in an on-campus setting along with a faculty member and fellow students."

Combining these digital course elements with on-campus interaction forms degree programs as relevant as they are timeless. With Southern Seminary Online, students from Buenos Aires to Birmingham can earn roughly two thirds of a master's degree online through faculty-taught and mentored courses. And, through hybrid-modular courses, distance students can complete the final third of a degree at Southern's historic, 154-year-old campus, with the engagement and warm-blooded fellowship that characterize the seminary experience and make it irreplaceable.

Rather than seeking shelter from the online tsunami that Hennessy predicted, Southern Seminary is facing shifts in higher education by preparing to meet the needs of the next generation of pastors, scholars, missionaries and church leaders, while maintaining the identity of the institution and reinforcing its mission. ►

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