

Seminaries expand online options

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue

It's tough enough for aspiring clergy to take on a student loan to finance three years of M.Div. studies at a seminary. For the applicant (and perhaps spouse), it might mean quitting a job and facing added financial problems.

Students who move to study at the Chicago Theological Seminary, for instance, encounter monthly rents from \$800 to well into the thousands, according to seminary president Alice Hunt. "Students who commute have significant transportation expenses," she added.

The good news, however, is that increasing numbers of seminarians who live far from the campus will be taking many courses online without a bit of the stigma that was attached to the "correspondence school diplomas" of yesteryear.

Dan Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for seminaries in North America, said in an interview that many of today's students and faculties are adept with computer technology.

"Distance-learning models are becoming more widespread," Aleshire said. In fact, many on-campus seminarians now take an online course if it resolves a conflict with another needed class or their work schedules. In the academic year 2011-2012, nearly 20,000 of about 74,000 seminarians enrolled at ATS member schools have completed at least one online course while still on campus, he said.

Before 2012, the ATS accrediting commission required that online courses could not exceed one-third of a student's classes. But this year, the ATS set guidelines for exceptions to the residency requirement. The Pittsburgh-based ATS informed six theological schools in the summer that they may begin allowing candidates for M.Div. and professional master's degrees to conduct these studies entirely online.

The Chicago Theological Seminary, affiliated with the United Church of Christ, announced September 3 that it was the only "progressive" school in the first list of schools granted that opportunity.

Justin Kim, director of online learning at the Chicago seminary, said online students are regarded as “valued and contributing members of the seminary community.” Seminarians at their computers can take part in “weekly chapel services, seminars and meetings,” he said.

Of the five other schools given the residency exception, three are Southern Baptist—Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Two Church of God schools also received permission: Anderson University School of Theology in Anderson, Indiana, and Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee.

Other schools petitioned for the online exception, Aleshire told the *Century*, but they were either denied for falling short of the ATS guidelines established in February or deferred pending a modification of their proposal or submission of more information about it.

Online programs are expected to reflect the core elements of the traditional master’s programs, he said.

“You are not giving a degree anonymously to a student who has had no engagement at church or sessions with an accountability committee or mentors working with online students.” Online students will occasionally have to travel to the campus for a weekend or for special events, Aleshire said.

Online courses are a high proportion at some other seminaries. The multicampus Fuller Theological Seminary and Abilene Christian University Graduate School of Theology recently were informed that they could grant master’s degrees in which 75 percent of the courses are online.

In Ohio, the United Theological Seminary briefly describes on its website a three-year online hybrid degree, which “allows you to complete your master of divinity in three years with just a minimum of two weeks per year at our Dayton campus.” Aleshire said that a third of United’s required course work is conducted in “intensive” sessions on campus.

“We won’t stop doing the basics, but theological education is at the front end of a grand diversification in the coming decade,” he said.