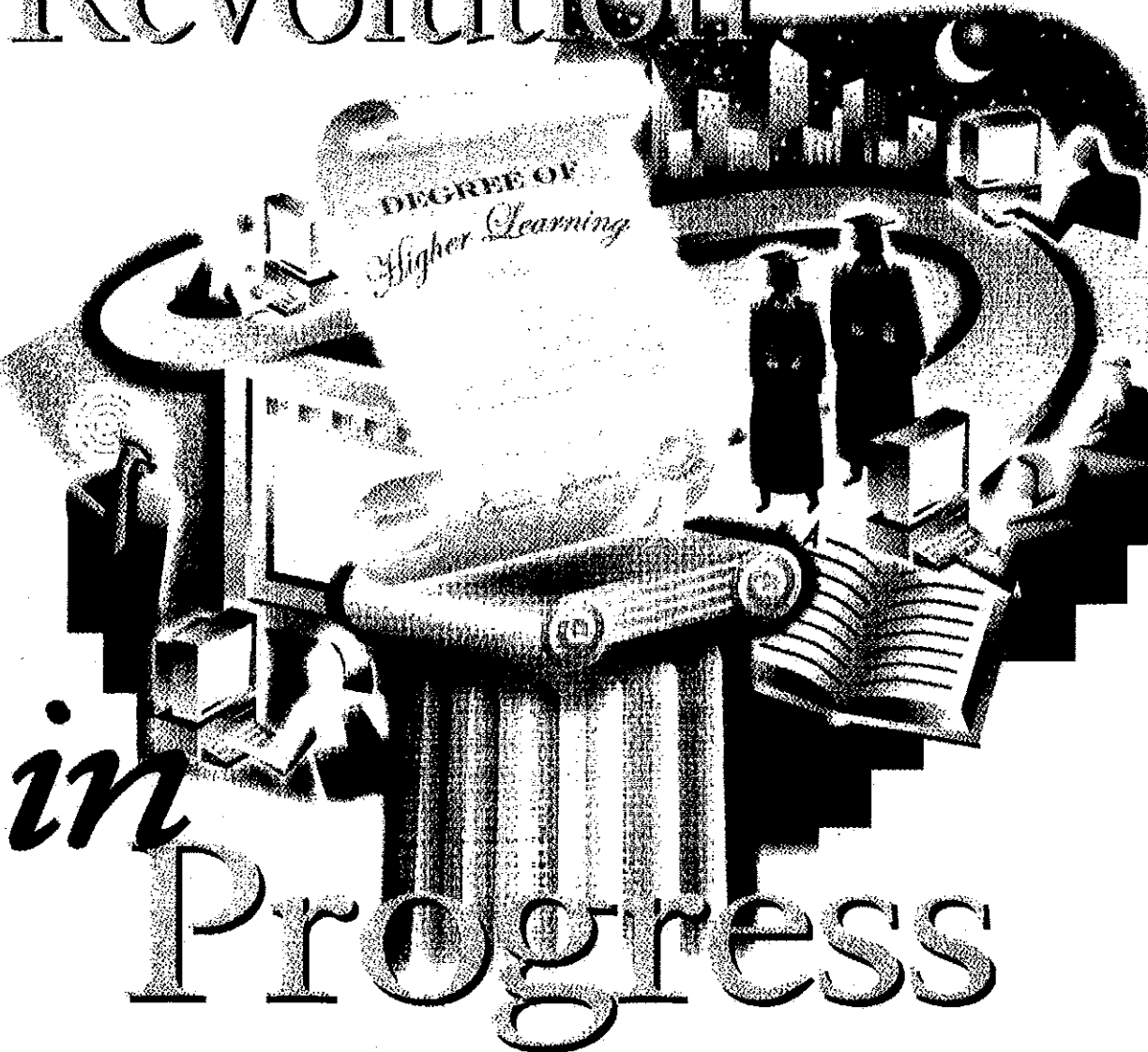


Revolution



in Progress

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN BLECK

Technology has already changed the face of theological education. But what we have seen so far may very well be just the beginning.

To posit that technology has changed the face of graduate theological education could be the understatement of the millennium. Yet it might be more accurate to say that technology "is still changing" than it would be to stay that it "has changed" theological education.

In other words, it could be that the best is yet to come.

"The technology of online learning will continue to develop exponentially so that today's cutting edge practices will be

entry-level concepts in five years," says Ronald Kroll, dean for distance education and media development at Columbia International University (CIU).

Andy J. Peterson, president of Reformed Theological Seminary's virtual campus, says, "To think that there will be little change in the format or the extent of online seminary education is to be ignorant of the great changes in communications technology. Who ever heard of 'podcasting' just a couple of years ago? We have little idea of the resources that will be available five years from now."

The capacity of a computer chip has been doubling every 18 months since 1968, says Gordon McAlister, dean of distance education at Crown College. "I dare say not even the folks at Microsoft can predict what online learning will be like when computers have three times the capacity they do now," says McAlister. He is confident that in five years "we should be seeing online practice sessions in counselor training, sermon delivery, small group leadership activities, and other things that people up to now have associated only with face-to-face learning."

continued on page 74

For more information, see the reader response card between pages 64 and 65.

Lagging Learning Curve

As technology and new learning techniques charge forward, the public largely lags behind with respect to its understanding of what distance education is all about.

"For many years, accredited seminary programs at our most prestigious schools dismissed distance education as an irresponsible educational option, leaving much-needed non-residential ministry training to unaccredited schools that frequently did not have the training or resources—and, in some instances, the inclination—to provide high-quality, educationally sound options," says James Stewart, director of distance education at Western Seminary.

"The fact that most states offer religious exemptions for Christian schools meant that almost anyone could start a school or seminary. Thus, much of the church's exposure to distance education was, by the default of our established schools, with programs

that often failed to meet learning expectations." Stewart concludes, "Over time, that impression stuck."

"Many 'older' people who spent seven or more years in the traditional college and seminary setting often find it difficult to see how one can receive a solid education through online or distance learning studies," says Ric Walston, president of Columbia Evangelical Seminary.

Nevertheless, says Walston, "while there is still a gap between what online education is and what the public believes it to be, that gap is becoming smaller all the time."

The "Quality" Question

According to Len Pellman, director of online admissions at Indiana Wesleyan University, there remains a "lingering misperception" with regard to "the quality of online education." But, Pellman notes, in more than 300 studies comparing online and classroom education, the majority have shown no statistically valid

difference in the quality or quantity of learning.

Says CIU's Kroll, "The quality of distance education used to be suspect because it was different and because numerous products of inferior quality in the public market cast a shadow over the high quality educational programs that were developing."

CES's Walston observes that the two most often cited drawbacks to distance learning are the lack of face-to-face student interaction and no physical library to do research. In response he observes, "I did the traditional route all the way through my doctoral program. During that time, while I did have interaction with other students, we rarely talked about academics. We far more often discussed sports or cars or where the best pizza joint was."

As for the library, Walston notes that while he pursued his doctoral degree in a traditional program, neither he nor his fellow students used the school's library

very extensively. "The Internet had far more resources, and the information was much easier to access."

"In higher education today, online courses are both as popular and as rigorous as face-to-face classes, and online programs can be found at the most prestigious universities," says CIU's Kroll. "Accrediting associations, generally regarded as the watchdogs of quality in higher education, have focused on student learning and student learning outcomes as the test of quality, and have removed language that defines quality in terms of delivery method." Kroll notes that all of the recognized agencies now accredit distance education programs.

Western's Stewart adds, "This quality concern was often over-stated, in my opinion. We often prefer to teach the way we learned, and we feel most comfortable in our traditional classrooms with students looking back at us happily." He continues, "I believe some of the quality concerns expressed were genuine and

heart-felt and reflected a desire to reserve approval until distance education demonstrated its worth empirically. Some concerns, however, were simply because distance education was different because they asked the educator to be a learner as well as a teacher."

Whatever concerns people may have over the quality of online education have not stopped students from pursuing it. According to the publication *Business 2.0*, 40 percent of current MBA students are enrolled in online degree programs. "This is an amazing level of acceptance in view of the fact that online education has only been readily available for about seven years," says IWU's Pellman.

A Bright Future

Though the perception of distance learning may be somewhat checkered, its future holds a lot of potential. Says Western's Stewart, "Internet2 access should trickle down to the smaller schools, virtually obliterating bandwidth concerns for

high-speed, full-screen content delivery and advanced communication systems. The continuing expansion of distance-pioneered technologies into the traditional classroom will change the way we schedule courses, how we teach, even how we hire faculty, and will effectively blur the line between distance education and campus course options."

But Stewart adds, "Much will depend on how the seminary community responds to the new systems. Unless individual seminaries, and the larger agencies that accredit distance education, decide to embrace new teaching and learning options, they have the potential to become an island in a sea of cultural change, reinforcing the perception that graduate theological education is out of touch and irrelevant."

RTS's Peterson observes, however, that "more and more accrediting associations, students, churches, businesses, and schools have embraced the idea of equivalent seminary education at a distance."

Interested in learning more about distance learning opportunities?

Here are phone numbers to use to request information about distance education programs from the colleges and universities advertising in this issue. You can also request information on these schools by filling out and sending in the reader response card between pages 64 – 65.

Asbury Theological Seminary (KY).....	800/2ASBURY	Dallas Theological Seminary (TX).....	866/DTS-WORD
Baptist Bible College and Seminary.....	800/451-2287	Erskine Theological Seminary (SC).....	800/241-8721
Bethel Seminary (MN).....	800/255-8706 ext. 6288	Fuller Theological Seminary (CA).....	626/584-5299
Columbia Evangelical Seminary (WA).....	360/802-6437	Indiana Wesleyan University (IN).....	888/IWU-2-DAY
Columbia International University (SC).....	800/777-2227	Liberty University (VA).....	800/424-9596
Corban College, Adult Studies Division (OR).....	800-764-1383	Toccoa Falls College (GA).....	888/785-5624
Cornerstone University (MI).....	800/697-1133	Western Seminary (OR).....	877/517-1800
Crown College (MN).....	866/CROWN-OL		

continued from page 76

"When it comes to an understanding of effective online teaching and learning, the field of education has successfully made the transition from classroom to cyberspace," says Crown's McAlister. "Our perspective has moved beyond the phase that Marshal McLuhan described as looking in the rearview mirror, the classic example of which was to see the automobile as a horseless carriage. In fact, rather than simply trying to imitate a classroom experience, blended models are beginning to use online tools and techniques in the traditional four-wall class."

McAlister adds, "Each one of our courses and degree programs has a thoughtful set of learning outcomes that are established and approved by an academic review process. Course reading, presentations, assignments, discussions, testing, and papers all align with those outcomes. It is not difficult to see if students are learning and applying concepts and achieving the learning goals of the course at the desired level of academic quality."

The Advantages of Distance Education

More and more people are pointing to the advantages distance education offers. "For far too long, there has been a disconnect between the seminary and the church," says Columbia Evangelical's Walston. "I have seen many young M.Div. graduates come out of seminary with lots of head knowledge but very little practical application. Online education, supplemented with internship activity at a local church, can be useful in correcting that problem."

Indiana Wesleyan has launched an online and onsite cohort model that leads to a master of arts degree in ministry

continued on page 82

leadership or youth ministry, with additional majors in missional leadership, cross-cultural ministry, and emerging evangelism being considered. "Enrollment has outpaced our expectations," says Bob Whitesel, interim director of IWU's department of graduate studies in ministry. More online cohorts, along with onsite cohorts in four Indiana cities as well as Kentucky, are planned for 2006. Says Whitesel, "Working outside the seminary model has allowed us to embrace a flexibility and innovation that we feel more efficiently equips church leaders to be world changers in a fast-paced postmodern culture."

William Larkin, professor of New Testament and Greek at Columbia International, points out another advantage. "A student can interact with and benefit from a teacher's instruction to the same degree at a distance as in person. Actually, students can't hide in an online course. The course process can be so constructed that they have to interact with the instructor and with each other."

Larkin adds, "Only through distance education is the benefit of immediate ministry application of what one is learning possible for the person who is not able to leave his ministry context for full time study."

"Another advantage of online courses, Larkin continues, "is that you can bring together students from a variety of geographical contexts to online classrooms. This past fall I had an online chat with students in Mexico City, Romania, Germany, and New Jersey about how to interpret and apply the example of humility in Philippians 2:5 – 11 in contemporary cultural context. The insights from the interaction among missionaries in Romania and Mexico, a student ministering to post-moderns in Germany, and a New Jersey pastor would not be possible in one traditional classroom."

To think that this could be just the beginning.

By Randy Frame, executive director of marketing and communications, Palmer Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and a freelance writer living in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

The Most Popular Online Courses



Several of the schools that contributed to this article listed their most popular online courses at their respective institutions. Following is an edited summary of their responses:

Columbia Evangelical Seminary

According to President Ric Walston, the most popular classes are those in apologetics. Second are practical classes in ministry. The field of apologetics lends itself more readily to online study because it is a topic people can learn through research and study.

Says Walston, "Of course, as we all know, this sort of knowledge without action is pointless, so those who study apologetics need to take what they learn and be 'salt and light' in their communities. However, online ministry classes should be (and easily can be) supplemented with hands-on application. This is where the local church can be very helpful. Pastors can act as tutors and guides, providing opportunities for students who are studying online. This can include allowing students to preach, conduct services, and teach Sunday school classes."

Columbia International University

The sequence of online Greek courses stands out in terms of popularity. Notes Shirl Schiffman, director of instructional development at CIU, "Students in these courses are immersed in a learning community even as they are immersed in the Greek language. All the instruction and help they need is provided through a multi-technology design. The students go through that deer-in-the-headlights stage of *How am I ever going to learn this?* and they come out on the other side compe-

tent, confident exegetes of the Greek New Testament." Schiffman adds, "These courses are also popular among people in ministry looking for an opportunity to brush up on their Greek skills."

Crown College

"Adult learners are interested in a field of knowledge and earning a degree much more than individual courses," says Gordon McAllister, dean of distance education at Crown. "That said, their favorites are teacher-specific not topic-specific. If an instructor gives personal attention, provides timely and meaningful comments in response to assignments, is encouraging and supportive, has a sense of humor and/or demonstrates mastery of a topic, students invariably have nothing but good things to say and are enthused with the course."

Indiana Wesleyan

Director of Admissions Len Pellman says, "In order, IWU Online's most popular programs are: the associate of science in business (ASB), bachelor of science in management (BSM), master's in education (M.ED.), master of business administration (MBA), and bachelor's degree completion program for registered nurses (M-BS)."

Reformed Theological Seminary

The most popular online courses are those on church history, Christian education, and instruction in the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew.

Western Seminary

Says James Stewart, director of distance education at Western, "The Bible and theology courses are the most popular in general. While we offer a number of ministry practice courses, our students prefer the foundational courses that will serve them well regardless of changes in the methodology of the church. That may change as our seminary increases the number of specialty resources that are designed for a rapid ministry response and shorter shelf life."