

# Distance Hybrid Master of Divinity: A Course Blended Program Developed by Western Theological Seminary

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*(with a concluding summary by Linda Cannell)*

*ABSTRACT: The complexity and challenges of distance education can seem daunting for many seminary administrators. The following case describes the experience of one seminary at which distance education was shaped to meet the learning outcomes of a Master of Divinity degree. Faculty adoption, student and faculty satisfaction, MDiv learning outcomes, formational assessment, and program quality were areas addressed by faculty and administrators in the creation of a new kind of distance learning program. The paper concludes with lessons learned through the seven-year experience.*

## Introduction

In 2000 the Reformed Church in America (RCA) urged Western Theological Seminary (WTS) to create a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program for distance learners. Mindful of its mission to serve the RCA as a denominational seminary, WTS's leadership embraced the challenge. Two critical decisions shaped the program: (1) the MDiv offered through distance learning was to be driven by educational factors and not by technology, and (2) the program had to maintain the established outcomes for graduates, including pastoral formation. These outcomes required students to experience regular relational engagement with the faculty and the campus community. Planning and fundraising began in 2001, a program director was hired in 2002, and the first matriculated student cohort began in November 2003. Now, after the first four years of this hybrid degree program, WTS has gained an expanded student body with increased diversity, faculty who appreciate the value and benefit of a blended hybrid model, a high retention rate, and students (and families) who are deeply grateful for the access to an MDiv this program offers and delighted with the high quality of the community and education they have experienced.

## Identifying denominational concerns

WTS is one of two seminaries of the RCA and is situated in the small West Michigan community of Holland. In the 1880s it began offering the residential MDiv. Changes in the RCA churches and mission began to suggest that different types of access to theological education would be needed for the twenty-first century. New leadership at the seminary began listening to the urging of denominational leaders who wanted emerging pastoral leaders to remain in ministry while pursuing their MDivs at Western Theological Seminary.

Throughout 2000 WTS faculty and administrators asked pastors and leaders about their needs and how they envisioned the seminary might serve them in the future. They were surprised to hear the urgency of the request for more accessible theological education. They interviewed men and women who were clearly called to ministry but unable to move to an RCA seminary. The denominational leaders identified losses through retirement and the need to equip church planting pastors as significant concerns for the next decade. Finally, they were told how important the context was in the ministerial formation of future pastors. For example, those called to serve a church in San Francisco or New York City found it difficult to be placed in a mentoring church in Holland, Michigan. These concerns were the catalyst for WTS to envision an accessible yet deeply formational distance MDiv.

### **Hybrid or blended design to meet MDiv outcomes**

WTS's commitment was to create a way, through the integration and support of technology, for distance students to receive a comparable theological education to that experienced by residential students. As a result, a hybrid MDiv has been created in which students remain at a distance yet take only four fully online courses throughout their five-year, ninety-six credit MDiv. The program blends both face-to-face and online learning components in each fourteen-week semester. Matriculated students are admitted in a cohort annually. Over the past four years, students and faculty have processed feedback from program and course assessment, peer group facilitator reports, formational assessment, admissions data, and orientation conversations. Faculty are delighted and sometimes surprised at the extent to which their curricular goals are being met.

Blended or hybrid courses and degree programs shift a significant amount of learning to the online medium, thus making it possible to reduce the amount of time in a face-to-face classroom.<sup>1</sup> Blended courses and programs are the primary focus of energy today in the development of distance learning across much of higher education.<sup>2</sup> They address the persisting problem of student retention in online learning and attend to the desire of the emerging "Net Generation" of students to be connected online without losing completely the face-to-face classroom experience.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as faculty get involved in blended courses, they realize they have to learn new teaching skills, and they discover that their new experiences in online courses cause them to redefine the purpose and approach for their face-to-face classroom experiences.

Both undergraduate and graduate programs are experiencing success in achieving learning outcomes through the integration of online and on-campus components.<sup>4</sup> These emerging programs are changing the way courses are developed by faculty<sup>5</sup> and altering the way distance programs are conceived.<sup>6</sup> While research on hybrid or blended degree programs is limited, initial findings suggest that faculty time for teaching a hybrid course is less than for teaching a fully online course.<sup>7</sup> Further, the preliminary findings suggest that hybrid courses may provide a better format for student learning.<sup>8</sup> As colleges and universities are developing blended courses, an accompanying

challenge is to understand the nature of an effective design when multiple blended courses are linked in a formal degree program.<sup>9</sup> As a result, creating a hybrid degree program involves a great deal of “learning-as-you-go,” and it often needs leaders who are adept in higher education administration and innovation.

Throughout the development of the WTS distance learning program, technology supported the educational values and the resulting program design. Program design choices were not determined by what technology could offer but rather by the desired educational and formational outcomes. During the early phase of program development, residential faculty were, not surprisingly, concerned about issues such as the appropriateness of the distance model for pastoral formation, workload expectations and adequate release time, the challenges of relearning how to teach with integrated technology, apprehension about the expected loss of student relationships, and the possibility that WTS would lose residential students. Learning to teach in a new way raised concerns about adequate institutional support. One by one, faculty engaged their concerns with the director as the collaborative work of course development began. Over time, faculty had opportunities to share with one another their growing wisdom from firsthand experience in the design and teaching of a distance hybrid course, and fears gave way to the surprising joy and reward despite the many hours of relearning a craft now requiring technology.

### Empowering faculty to succeed

Empowering faculty success involved several elements. First, each faculty member’s attitude toward and experience with technology had to be identified along with general skill level. Second, several classrooms were updated with fixed technology so faculty could try new tools in a familiar environment with predictably high levels of success the first time. Faculty experiences with *reliable* classroom technology were a critical factor in rebuilding positive attitudes toward technology. They could also experiment with the distance course software (ANGEL) at their own pace.<sup>10</sup> They discovered that they could quickly master basic features such as posting their syllabuses, and they found it could assist them with some repetitive and time-consuming administrative duties, such as grading weekly quizzes. Faculty teaching their first courses in the distance program had a full year to experiment with ANGEL, and the remaining faculty had two or three years to learn it at their own pace as they used it for their residential courses.

In 2002 roughly 10 percent of the faculty were identified as early adopters<sup>11</sup> of technology and only 10 percent were younger than 40 years of age. Faculty reported few positive experiences with technology and rarely did a professor speak favorably of the technology support given by the institution. Most faculty had old computers, and no classroom had reliably integrated technology. Hardware for faculty was neither standardized nor on a consistent upgrade cycle. Further, there was a strong withholding culture across the seminary regarding technology. This culture left the faculty feeling frustrated, discouraged, and convinced that technology was far too much trouble to work

with. To the faculty's delight, however, a new permission-granting culture has emerged, and they now feel empowered to risk in new ways as they link new technology to learning outcomes.

Third, a new type of blended course design was developed that integrated each professor's goals, learning outcomes, and vision for his or her course. This gave faculty the freedom to shape the course design in a way that matched their outcomes for students, was consistent with technology standards, and maintained a generally consistent format across courses, allowing for a high quality of student support. Standard online course design models typically used by instructional designers and based on the model of software production fit neither the blended courses that WTS was offering nor the higher education culture of the seminary. It is interesting to note that numerous blended degree programs in higher education are not using the common instructional design model for course development and are creating a faculty-oriented model while maintaining quality levels of course consistency. This practice can lead to cost savings in creating new distance programs.

A permeating conviction throughout the design of the program was that technology *supported* the educational goals and values of WTS's MDiv program. Technology options and rich media possibilities did not drive or determine the course design or educational practices. WTS has found repeatedly in its course evaluations that students value interaction with their professors and peers over interaction with advanced rich media. This is consistent with the literature on student satisfaction in distance education.

While most learners, like people in general, have favorite communications technologies, it is rarely technology that determines how our learners feel about their distance learning programs. Whatever the technology used, what determines their satisfaction is the attention they receive from their teachers and from the system they work in to meet their needs . . .<sup>12</sup>

### **Experiencing a fully blended program design**

WTS's distance MDiv program has been a positive experience for faculty and students. One professor in 2002 was convinced that spiritual formation could not be taught at a distance through technology. Today, he is one of the program's most enthusiastic proponents as he has creatively integrated both web-enhanced and face-to-face features in his seminar on spiritual formation. Now in the fifth year of the program, the majority of the faculty are neither apprehensive regarding program quality nor resistant to the program as a whole. They are pleased with the learning that has taken place in their courses, and students report that they learn as well or better in this blended format design when compared to residential classroom programs. These primarily second-career adult students are highly motivated to learn and participate weekly in in-depth dialogue within a course at a level faculty rarely experience in their residential courses. "I'm thrilled by my experience in this program," one second-career student told me. "I was really concerned about whether I could

learn online and if I have a similar experience as if I were on campus. But the combination of online and on campus together in a course makes all the difference. And the collaborative noncompetitive learning community is an absolute highlight of the program!" While faculty support the blended learning design, the work of incorporating this type of program within the seminary remains an administrative challenge. The complexity and administrative challenge of distance programs for a residentially focused campus cannot be underestimated.

The transition into a web-enhanced degree program has not been without its challenges for faculty. Coordinating the work and decisions of a team of people (i.e., program director for pedagogical direction, educational technologist, and professor) in order to create and deliver a course in which students are well supported is a new experience for faculty and most seminaries. Full completion of a course in advance of the start date can be a tough adjustment for faculty who tend to be more spontaneous. Most often, faculty have established the practice of working individually in the creation of their courses, but this practice changes substantially in distance programs where a team is required to assist with the technology components and the support of students. Another challenge is the steep learning curve for faculty who must acquire a new understanding and new roles (pedagogical, social, managerial, and technologic) related to teaching online.<sup>13</sup>

Next generation blended or hybrid programs are primarily distinguished by the incorporation of both online and face-to-face residential components within courses and degree programs. Two-week intensives on campus inserted into the middle of two fourteen-week semesters plus one fully online course annually is the pattern WTS has chosen for its blended program design. Students begin their courses online working in a highly collaborative asynchronous learning community where faculty's regular presence allows for a rich learning engagement. After several weeks online, students come to campus to continue their learning in a classroom. They are highly motivated to use the time together on campus for continued dialogue and course discussion. At the end of a two-week intensive, the students return home to conclude their learning online.

In addition to class time, the on-campus intensives incorporate numerous other formational and community-shaping experiences. These include student-led morning prayer followed by breakfast together, a morning break for student-led worship and community fellowship, evenings over dinner in the homes of faculty, occasional evening lectures on topics of special interest to the students, several meetings of their peer group for prayer, mentoring and mutual support facilitated by an ordained clergyperson, special lunches with denominational leaders, a spiritual formation retreat each spring, an intercultural immersion experience, and special seminars offered annually on such topics as sexual abuse and diversity training. New student preparation takes place over a four-stage cycle incorporating both online and on-campus experiences during the first year a student is in the program.

WTS faculty have worked to create a distance MDiv in which online students have many of the same experiences as residential students. After several years, there are encouraging signs as faculty report that the seminary's community and culture are shaping the personal and spiritual formation of the distance students. Through their online and on-campus experiences each year, they develop a strong sense of community, and they speak and write about the way the culture of WTS is shaping their pastoral identity. In addition, the cohort design contributes to the unusually high retention rate (approximately 90%)<sup>14</sup> as students support one another and are in regular contact with one another, especially through the peer groups. Each year the winter intensive concludes with students and faculty gathered in the home of the seminary's president for dinner followed by students sharing their experiences of the program. After listening to the students, one theology professor remarked, "When we were designing the distance program, we really hoped that it would be as good as the residential MDiv. But now it looks like the distance program is even better than we could have imagined."

### **A technology infused future**

Undertaking the development of a distance degree program, whether a blended design or a pure online design, is a long-term investment in the new paradigm of twenty-first century education in which the physical and virtual components are integrated. Students today are connected, whether online or on the phone. Their experience is about mobile computing, collaborative learning, and almost continual social interaction. But most students have no interest in leaving behind the experience of a residential community and face-to-face learning. Leading a seminary into the twenty-first century will inevitably mean engaging the changing nature of learning and the changing characteristics of students in a world infused with technology.<sup>15</sup>

The direction of today's technology is toward dynamic interaction—to enhance social engagement through technology wherever people are geographically. While many seminaries may choose not to engage distance degree programs of any design, future residential students will increasingly expect greater and greater integration of dynamic technology in their educational experience.<sup>16</sup> By embarking on the journey of creating a distance blended program, WTS has provided a degree sought after by increasing numbers and has begun to rework its residential programs for the twenty-first century. More than 95 percent of full-time faculty use ANGEL and classroom technology for all their courses. This is a remarkably high rate of adoption and one that will serve WTS well into the future as residential students are attracted to this learning environment.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sustaining blended distance degree programs: Lessons learned**

Reflecting on the experience of WTS's distance program and the growing literature in the field of distance education, several recommendations are suggested:



- Plan carefully with special attention to using an organizational systems approach.<sup>18</sup> Distance programs will impact nearly every element of an institution, often requiring change. Draw upon leaders who can assess your institution's degree of readiness regarding technology integration, and support systems, perceptions, and degree of receptivity across the institutional culture. In time, everything begins to change when a seminary embraces a distance program in which students are widely dispersed.<sup>19</sup> Knowing this factor is critical to long-term sustainability and program vitality. Practices and policies taken for granted in a residential world now no longer fit well and inadequately support student learning. Faculty, administrators, and staff involved with distance programs need reeducation into the field of distance higher education. Technology-enriched programs are dynamic and require continual upgrading. In most cases, these lessons are best learned as faculty are involved in designing and developing courses and facilitating the learning of their students.
- Involve leaders with teaching and administrative experience who can provide an informed understanding of the many aspects involved and point to valuable resources. These can include resources in budget management and planning for a technology-infused degree program,<sup>20</sup> online and blended learning, course development and assessment (at both course and program level), standards of quality for distance education,<sup>21</sup> and various ways of student support.<sup>22</sup>
- Define long-term goals early in the process, whether it is to offer online courses, web-enhanced residential courses, or creating a full distance degree program. It is apparent that investing in technology-integrated teaching and learning will not be a one-time investment, nor likely a modest investment for some seminaries. Utilizing the investment to reach a new student population seems a strategic consideration. WTS has gained additional tuition revenue that has been vital to ongoing resource investment. However, an institution doesn't undertake distance learning to increase revenues; most often, there are significant costs involved.
- Senior leadership and institutional legitimacy are essential for a sustainable distance degree program. Harnessing adequate resources over the long term of development will be essential. Likely, senior leaders will need to embark on their own learning curve as diligently as faculty. Most day-to-day decisions by academic administrators are currently based on the assumptions and practices of a residential paradigm. Administrators will need to gain a new understanding of the nature of distance programs and what they require for both educational effectiveness and long-term sustainability. For example, a common residential approach to student support is a misfit for a distance program. Activities that foster formation in a distance program will be different, to some degree, from those in a residential program but no less vital to the success of the program. Program assessment will take on a greater importance and challenge myths and models that rely on residential practices. These and numerous other differences will require resources to develop and skilled staff to implement, neither of which may be fully considered or adequately planned for initially. As

reported by Amrein-Beardsley and others,<sup>23</sup> planning for a degree program requires greater attention to the many program pieces—not just courses. This observation has been borne out in Western’s experience.

- Take an educational and strategic approach to technology. The critical commitment underlying success in distance degree programs is to effectively meet educational objectives and student learning outcomes. A congruent program design follows and is then supported by particular technology. Not all technology may be appropriate for the educational objectives of a course or degree program. In addition, WTS determined that faculty adoption was a high value to the long term quality and sustainability of the program. Both of these convictions shaped the approach to course design and technology used. Strategic classroom upgrades and course management software (ANGEL) were chosen based on criteria that were directly linked to faculty adoption. These criteria included ease of use, reliability, degree of support required, amount of maintenance downtime, nature of proprietary restrictions, growth capacity, and annual cost. Faculty now regularly record lectures in a digital format, use weblinks in class, develop collaborative assignments through drop boxes, and capitalize on the learning benefits of threaded discussions in their residential and distance courses. Today there is a regular cycle for upgrading faculty technology, expanded access to the library and web-based databases enhancing faculty research, and an increase in WTS’s visibility and attraction to prospective students.

## **Concluding observations**

As WTS worked to integrate technology for the distance program, it became clear that a critical distinction had to be made between administrative technology and educational technology. The assumptions, practices, and staff skills are many times different for each of these separate professional fields. A successful distance degree program requires the development of educational technology and staffing structures to ensure success for the academic programs. Administrative technology tends to include network systems, software, and hardware for administrative work.

Because faculty adoption was a critical factor, faculty members had to see that student learning in the online medium was comparable to what they perceived in the residential MDiv; they had to be assured of long-term sustainability; and a course design approach had to be created that placed the faculty culture and established practices of course design at the forefront. The director brought an educational approach to consulting with faculty as they began to work with the new rhythm of a course that began online, moved to the campus, and then concluded online. This consultative process included the educational technologist and lasted approximately six to eight months. Voluntary lunch sessions were offered to share lessons learned and to seek assistance with problems. Courses previously taught were open for new faculty to review and meet with the professor who created them to learn one-on-one.



The development of a distance MDiv will likely mean engaging an academic institution in change, perhaps deep change.<sup>24</sup> Familiarity with research on change in higher education can offer insights about long-term challenges as academic leaders attempt to work with “institutional policies and governance structures that aren’t conducive to implementing change.”<sup>25</sup> Calculating the capacity people have for coping with change and for acquiring new skills while creating entirely new approaches for supporting students and faculty, new feedback and assessment systems, and new modes of pastoral formation will be a critical factor in program sustainability. Balancing the pace of program development and resource investment while establishing clear deadlines and goals that keep people moving forward is an art not easily achieved but essential for sustainability. It has been important for WTS to be realistic in the work of creating courses for a hybrid format while also having course timelines with deadlines. Courses have been scheduled well in advance, and faculty know when they can expect to take the plunge into distance teaching.

A temptation may be to place energy (and resources) primarily with faculty to the neglect of staff development and numerous other program demands. The cumulative impact can be continual high stress levels and a progression of reduced program quality. Leading with the awareness of a systems perspective is critical for implementing new distance degree programs.

Academic leaders encounter a delicate balancing act between defending academic tradition in its broader context and facilitating the unproven potential of adopting and assimilating new innovations, ideas, and practices into the academic culture. . . . This dilemma has been, and will continue to be, the most fundamental reason change is so difficult for most universities at the departmental, college, and institutional levels.<sup>26</sup>

WTS was able to capitalize on the new interest and demands of a distance degree program for broader institutional impact such as expanded discussions on student learning, the nature of pastoral formation, and outcomes assessment effectiveness. The changes required for distance education stimulated WTS’s faculty to explore student learning at a deeper level. One New Testament professor shared with faculty after teaching his first distance course:

For the first time in all my years of teaching I really had to stop and think about student learning. How did I know if they were really learning? I couldn’t see their responses in class. This has forced me to read and think about learning for the first time in my teaching career. My residential courses will never be the same again!

During course development, faculty received new materials to review on the nature of student learning, learning online, and collaborative learning.<sup>27</sup> The distance program also stimulated an opportunity to create a new assessment



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process for identifying the development of pastoral formation across the program. Twice each year, students write a reflection paper in which they respond to one of four different questions related to the development of their pastoral formation. Review of these papers over four years has identified encouraging growth in students' pastoral formation.

The integration of technology in new learning opportunities marks the rapidly emerging future of higher education. "The technological revolution has transformed every major social institution in our culture."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, every facet of formal education is experiencing these deep changes. The impact for theological education is both challenging and costly, suggesting that a new era of partnerships and forms of collaboration may soon be upon us in order to manage the increasing demands of technology and to be prepared for the way the Net Generation learns.

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## Reflections on the “Next Generation” in Distance Learning in Theological Education

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Meri MacLeod’s article reflects her experience as both a teacher and an administrator. The article’s value is in the lessons learned from considered, competent, hands-on involvement in the planning and implementation of a program in distance education. MacLeod offers insight from what she and her team have learned about the specific support needs of faculty and students and the administrative details necessary for effectiveness. The sort of planning and intensive support MacLeod and her team demonstrate is becoming more common among those seminaries that are taking next generation distance learning seriously. In my judgment, the elements that give this program and others their next generation character are as follows:

1. WTS determined *before* hiring a director that the program would reflect the seminary’s values. These values included the importance of service and personal, pastoral, and spiritual development in a relational community.
2. A competent *educator* was hired as director to ensure that the program would be driven by educational values and process and not simply by technology. In this case, the director, Meri MacLeod, has a PhD in education, managed a \$5 million nontraditional adult program, and taught for seven years at the extension campus of a major seminary in the United States. She understands the nature of teaching and learning and, just as importantly, understands assessment for *learning*. It was important to WTS that the program be educationally rather than technologically driven.
3. To avoid the “step-child” syndrome, the faculty designed the distance learning MDiv as part of the regular academic program, staffed by regular faculty supplemented with guest faculty. When participants are on campus, they are there at the same time as the residential students, thus reinforcing the fact that the distance learning MDiv is part of the whole.
4. MacLeod and her team work tirelessly to build the supports needed by faculty. The day-by-day effort to foster a “learning community of faculty” is central to this support. The best “training” is informal, peer-to-peer, and suited to the faculty member’s level of experience. Most faculty members voluntarily share their experiences and best practices for course development with one another.
5. Two of the more frustrating elements in the design of online learning are addressed: The technologists commit to having the necessary resources available and working. Then, when a faculty member is ready to be creative and move to another level, the team is ready with support.
6. Student feedback on “what they love and what they hate” is elicited and taken seriously in planning.

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7. Because the program is educationally driven, the faculty are adding ideas to their personal repertoire that will increase student engagement in higher order learning. Adult participants are expected to assume responsibility for their own learning.
8. Next generation distance learning programs are typically “blended” programs. At WTS, however, the program participants don’t just come to campus for a week or more of face-to-face class time. They are oriented to the campus, to their colleagues, and to the faculty at the beginning of the program—their accommodations and initial experiences of professional quality. Participants are involved in a spiritual formation retreat, professional development seminars, and six semesters of supervised ministry. Because the program is intentionally diverse, all participants receive sexual harassment and racial awareness training to deal with blind spots and to nurture a community that takes “respect of the other” seriously.
9. The participants are treated in every way as *adult* learners. Throughout their program, participants are involved in different types of cohort activities with or without a faculty presence. Even the more skeptical affirm that the community works.

Through the work of its director, Meri MacLeod, her team and faculty, the distance learning MDiv program is reaching adult professionals who otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to pursue a ministry degree. Distance learning programs are known for high drop-out rates. The drop-out rate in the WTS distance learning MDiv program is remarkably low, and participant response has been overwhelmingly positive.

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## ENDNOTES

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