

# What's happening to the residential model of theological education?

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*Photo courtesy of Princeton Theological Seminary*

For decades, theological educators have assumed a number of things about “residential” theological education and the formation that takes place when students and faculty meet regularly on campus. Students interact with faculty and peers in class, but they also rub elbows in the halls, share meals, worship together, live close to one another, and in other ways interact simply by being part of the same community. In many cases, faculty also spend a great deal of time on campus outside of class time and beyond posted office hours.

With the development of technologies to support distance education, residency remained the standard against which the quality of online education was measured. In the *Standards of Accreditation* educational standard 2, which is less than a half-page in length, describes *campus-based education* in which “faculty, students, administrative support services, and library and information resources” are in a common location. Campus-based education “provides in-person classroom teaching and learning and opportunities for corporate worship, informal interaction, and other activities that support or enhance students’ educational experiences.” Two sub-points briefly define *residency* and require schools to provide educational opportunities “that contribute to the intellectual, spiritual, personal, and professional formation necessary for religious leadership.”

Standards ES.3 (Extension education) and ES.4 (Distance education) each cover three pages, define what is meant by the terms *extension* and *distance*, and require schools to explain how facets of education in those contexts, including educational design, resources, and institutional procedures, “match those on the main campus.”

The degree program standards use residential theological education as the norm and provide for exception to the Standards “if a school can demonstrate how its educational design and delivery system accomplishes the learning outcomes associated with residential theological study.”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear to many theological educators that the circumstances of theological education related to residency have been changing over recent years, and the Standards reflect and seek to address changes that have happened, but the extent of the change has not been measured.

Until now.

The Educational Models and Practices project survey of academic deans asked for percentages of students living on or adjacent to campus, those the deans considered “local commuters,” and those who are “non-local commuters.” The average of the percentages from all respondents is revealing. Only 27% of students live on or adjacent to campus, and another 26% are non-local commuters. Nearly half were categorized as “local commuters.” Each school should analyze its own student populations, but the overall picture is clear: nearly three-fourths of students across the Association are *not* ordinarily present on campus for the formation that can happen naturally through residency.

A number of ATS schools invest substantial resources to provide residential theological education for their students. The educational models and practices project has formed 18 peer groups to study a variety of educational models and practices and has also grouped together schools of distinctive heritage or type. One group is a set of schools that emphasize residential theological education and focus their resources on providing robust forms of that model. Their students are predominately full-time, and many live on campus. Being a theological student is their vocation, and resources are provided so that they can fulfill that vocation with a minimum of distractions. Most don’t accumulate debt—at least for tuition—and the great majority complete their degree programs in the time designed for the degree.

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Even in those contexts, however, some of the group’s participants worry that students are not taking full advantage of the opportunities for education and formation that the residential opportunity affords. Campus worship, for example, is not as well attended as it once was. Students don’t congregate in libraries or dining halls as they once did. Interaction between students and faculty outside of class requires more planning and purpose than previously. It may be that the current generation of students is simply “wired” differently from previous generations and not as able or willing to take full advantage of residential opportunities, or perhaps today’s

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<sup>1</sup> ATS Standards of Accreditation, (*Masters*) A.3.1.3., B.3.1.3., and C.3.1.3, (*doctoral*) F.3.1.1., I.3.1.1., and J.3.1.1.

students have a greater range of alternate opportunities not related to the campus and its programs.

Another insight from the group is related to faculty attitudes about curriculum—largely under their control and the place where much of their energy goes—versus extra-curricular activities and the staff who facilitate them. For some faculty, if it is not in the curriculum, it is by definition less important. Some in the peer group, however, insist that many of the things that make the residential model of theological education particularly valuable and effective are *not* in the curriculum. How do schools help emphasize the importance of these “extra-curricular” items in the educational and formational processes?

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And some residential schools face declining enrollments despite the resources they make available and their best efforts to recruit students.

The residential model has been, is, and will continue to be an important form of theological education within the Association. There are lessons to be learned, though, from both the values affirmed by the model and the adaptations highly residential schools must make to ensure effectiveness for new generations of students.