**Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

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**Project Description**

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary is using this grant to research and assess the effectiveness of a scholarship program that we have designed to address the economic challenges of future pastoral leaders. We intend to design and implement improvements to our scholarship program by applying new strategies and enhancements developed from the outcomes of the research and assessment.

The Partnership Program is an innovative scholarship program that educates students in financial stewardship and fundraising while assisting them with a full-tuition scholarship. As part of their fundraising education, Partnership students build a team of partners—both prayer and financial—who support them through and often beyond seminary. The Partnership Program started in 2005 with an initial 38 students at our Hamilton campus, and has grown to over 200 students spread across three campuses today.

Though we have seen such incredible growth in the program, we have not yet undertaken a methodical assessment to determine to what extent the degree the program is achieving its purposes. We also have yet to address our program infrastructure such as tracking, capturing, and reporting on student and graduate data as the program continues to grow.

**Project Design**

The first phase of our project will be to research the effectiveness of our current Partnership Program. In conducting this research, we would like to gain an understanding of the value of the Partnership Program related to its goals, including:

* Providing theological grounding in biblical stewardship
* Building capability in fundraising for students in their future ministries
* Financial stewardship including reduction of personal debt (educational loans, consumer debt, etc.)
* Ongoing involvement of Partnership Donors in the form of prayer and financial support

The second phase will be to implement an improved Partnership Program on the basis of our research findings. Our desire is to discover unexpected ways in which we can improve the program, but we also believe we will be able to validate the need for enhancements in areas where up to now, we only have anecdotal evidence of a need for change. For instance, as the program has evolved, we recognize the need to better equip students by enhancing enhance the educational components of the program. Additionally, we aim to improve the way we engage and build lasting relationships with churches and individual partnership donors. This is anticipated to be a crucial factor in the long-term success of the program.

The end goal is a program that has a short-term impact of mitigating student debt and long-term impacts of:

* Creating steward-leaders of personal, family and church finance and
* Establishing long-term relationships with Partnership donors.

**Progress**

Phase one of our project is centered on extensive assessment of our current Partnership Program, requiring formal research plans to be developed and implemented by both internal and external consulting teams. Stakeholder identification, and a full initial project plan was crucial to the launch of our program, which relies heavily on the time investments of departmental directors and administrative leadership.

Since our project launch in February, we have identified a project core team consisting of several key directors within the institution, who have direct association with the Partnership program. Our core team has met over the course of several months to identify and discuss particular challenges facing the program, ranging from operational concerns to specific research needs. Additionally, our Stewardship and Partnership offices have undergone a process of collecting and organizing legacy partnership data in preparation research, as well as preparing our affiliated departments to handle the maintenance of the current program while research, design and changes are implemented in the coming years.

We have also established a team of research consultants from Auburn Seminary’s Center for the Study of Theological Education (CSTE). The consultants from CSTE helped us design our formal research tools in the form of surveys and interviews, the results of which are currently being analyzed. This research will serve as the primary means by which we will evaluate the program before we design and approve our improvements later this year.

**Challenges and Considerations**

The Partnership Program has been designed to address with the root problems of student debt in an integrated and holistic manner, utilizing whole life stewardship practices. Though we recognize the joint problem facing many incoming students of a lack of personal funding and a deficiency in stewardship training, we believe that both problems may be solved simultaneously while working towards a degree, rather than before a student comes or after they graduate. The solution comes through the intentional strengthening of a student’s personal ties with their own community, and formal training on the wise stewardship of personal and communal finances.

One of the biggest challenges that we have faced in preparation for program assessment is that it involves an integrated, multi-departmental effort. Balancing day-to-day workloads is difficult for many seminary staff as it is, and the introduction of additional labors to assess the stewardship training and fundraising guidance can be overly taxing.

Secondarily, we have faced the challenge of our organization being relationally removed from the student’s partners (both individuals and churches). The busyness of both the staff and the students in daily seminary life often precludes the level of follow up and contact that we as an institution would like to have with many of these partners.