(Not) Being There: The Auburn study of online distance education
Tom Tanner | December 2017

I just finished reading (Not) Being There: Online Distance Education in Theological Schools by Sharon L. Miller and Christian Scharen. It is a newly-released report in the Auburn Studies (No. 23—Fall 2017) that "highlights the changing features of online distance education within theological schools." It is based on two recent surveys (one by Auburn and one by ATS) and a synthesis of two decades of research on online education among graduate theological schools, especially articles in ATS's *Theological Education* and in the Wabash Center's *Teaching Theology and Religion*. This Auburn Studies report presents various perspectives, but makes a strong case for the value and effectiveness of online learning in theological education.

The report's title was influenced by the teaching tips section in the Wabash journal, traditionally titled "In the Classroom," which began featuring a parallel section titled "(Not) in the Classroom" for teaching online. The report also highlights the 1997 work by Jackson Carroll et al. (including ATS's recently retired executive director, Dan Aleshire), entitled *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools.* The report posits that being "there" does produce more effective theological education… if the "there" is defined less as a residential seminary campus and more as a student's own contextual and congregational community, which online learning more easily allows. Some of the report's findings are based on work done by the ATS Educational Models and Practices Project, especially the three peer groups looking at online education. Those findings are supplemented in the Auburn Studies report with four case studies of ATS schools with online offerings: Bethel Seminary of Bethel University, Luther Seminary, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and Columbia Theological Seminary. Among the more interesting statements in the report are these excerpts:

- Increasingly, the professorate [of ATS schools] will be populated with teachers… who have never known a world without computers and who have never known classroom teaching as an experience solely of "being there."

- This report comes at a fulcrum time when the field is moving from elective participation in a few set [educational] models… to a much more integrated range of digital realities used for teaching and learning… there is no longer a clear demarcation between online students and residential students, as students move back and forth between the two formats as their work and life commitments dictate.

- The Auburn survey results… show: regular faculty [not adjuncts] teach most online courses… However, the shift in the center of gravity from classroom to congregation changes the role and identity of the faculty.

- [Given the high proportion of commuter students among most residential seminaries,] one professor commented, "What is distant about distance education? Some students are closer to you online than on campus."

As one of the authors (Sharon Miller) commented to me in an email recently:

"I know a lot of presidents and deans, if they don't already offer online degrees or programs, are thinking of venturing into those waters with the hopes of boosting enrollment. At the same time, there are others who are skeptics and don't believe that online theological education can offer the quality of theological education they think is needed. I think this report will be beneficial to both - cautioning about jumping in without doing your homework, but also assuring readers … that the verdict is in: online theological education can be as effective as traditional theological education. Our hope is that the report continues the conversation!" So, do I.