

Board of Commissioners approves fully online professional degree programs at six schools

A lot has changed in thirteen years. Until 2000, ATS accrediting standards did not permit any kind of distance education. Recently, the Board of Commissioners of the ATS Commission on Accrediting, by granting exceptions to the residency requirement, made fully online degree programs possible at six member schools, three of them offering the MDiv.



Until 2012, the Commission standards of accreditation for the MDiv restricted online courses to one-third of a student's course work. But in June 2012, the membership of the Commission on Accrediting approved changes to the standards that permitted two significant boosts to distance education:

- ◆ An academic MA may be earned fully online, and schools that have been approved for comprehensive distance education (e.g., six or more online courses) do not need to petition for approval to offer the academic MA in an online format.
- ◆ Although the accrediting standards retained a residency requirement in the MDiv and professional masters' degrees, a school may be granted an exception to this requirement if it is able to demonstrate how the design of the online program meets the educational goals of residency.

In February 2013, the Board of Commissioners adopted guidelines that it would consider in considering petitions for exceptions to residency. At its August 2013 meeting, the board reviewed the first

round of petitions for exceptions, and the following schools were granted exceptions to the residency requirement:

- ◆ Anderson University School of Theology—MA in Christian Ministry
- ◆ Chicago Theological Seminary—MDiv
- ◆ Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary—MDiv
- ◆ Pentecostal Theological Seminary—MA in Discipleship and Christian Formation, MA in Counseling, MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and MA in Church Ministries
- ◆ Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary—Master of Arts in Church Planting
- ◆ Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary—MDiv and MACE

Additional schools petitioned for the exception, but their petitions were either denied because the board determined that they did not adequately meet the guidelines established in February or were deferred pending some additional information or modifications to program design.

In the 2011–2012 academic year, nearly 20,000 of the approximately 74,000 students enrolled in ATS member schools completed at least one course by distance education. The vote of ATS member schools in 2012 to permit these exceptions continues to affirm the importance of some residency in theological education but provides room for schools with good program design and capacity to develop those programs in response to student demand. Other accrediting agencies have increasingly approved fully online programs in professional education similar to theological education, such as postbaccalaureate counselor training.

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Looking back, these changes represent a logical progression from the approval in 2001 of comprehensive

distance education programs at six schools: Andover Newton Theological School, Asbury Theological Seminary, Atlantic School of Theology, Bethel Seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. None of those schools was approved to offer full degrees online at that time.

Also in 2001, nine schools were approved to offer a **few courses**, although not the six courses that would qualify as a “comprehensive” distance education program. Those schools were Earlham School of Religion, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, International School of Theology (now closed), North Park Theological Seminary, Queen’s College Faculty of Theology, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Today, 103 schools—38 percent of the ATS membership—offer at least six courses online.

[Read John Dart’s report on this news in *The Christian Century*.](#)