



New delivery method opens Ph.D. program to distance students

By Gary D. Myers | July 28, 2016

NEW ORLEANS -- A new doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) delivery system at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) opens the research-based degree to non-residential students while upholding high academic standards and fostering a vibrant learning community.

The new approach, known as SYNC at NOBTS, allows the seminary to offer seminars and colloquia to Ph.D. students via synchronous interactive video regardless of where they live. The Association of Theological Schools' (ATS) Commission on Accrediting approved the new model for a three-year experimental period.

Unlike other online study models in which the student interacts with course material on his or her own schedule, SYNC requires a set meeting time each week—just like the main campus Ph.D. students. Non-residential students will access live streaming video from the New Orleans-based classroom via Blue Jeans® video conferencing software. Distance students and residential students alike will be able to participate in real-time interaction with each other and the professor.

"With the technology available today, we can create a community of learning that is separated by distance," said Charlie Ray, director of the research doctoral program at NOBTS. "Simultaneous streaming video allows people anywhere in the world to join the classroom here. That extends our walls to help people answer God's call."

Offering real-time video with significant interaction between main campus and distance students was key to gaining ATS approval for the pilot program, said Ray. This ability to foster an interactive, vibrant academic community was not only a non-negotiable to the accrediting agency but also vital to the established values and demands of the seminary's research doctoral program.

All the Ph.D. seminars and colloquia may be taken in the SYNC format. However, distance students must complete certain aspects of the degree on the main campus including the week-long research and writing course, qualifying exams, oral exams, and the dissertation defense.



During the three-year experimental period, careful research will compare the achievement of distance students in relation to their residential counterparts based on fulfillment of course objectives and outcomes. This research is designed to test the long-term viability of the SYNC model.

The new distance approach comes at a time when an increasing number of NOBTS Ph.D. students are serving as pastors and ministers, Ray said. Currently, close to 16 percent of the school's Ph.D. students are serving as senior pastors. Still others are serving the local church in other ministry areas. According to Ray, that number will likely increase with the addition of SYNC initiative.

"The Ph.D. is about answering questions," Ray said. "We need people in the church who are looking at the hard questions and working to gather the data to answer those hard questions."

The new synchronous video model will be implemented in several Ph.D. classrooms during the upcoming fall semester. Full rollout of the program will come during the spring semester when four seminars and four colloquia will be available in the SYNC-enabled format. The seminars and colloquia will be offered in the areas of biblical studies, evangelism, missions, preaching/biblical exposition and theology.

Initially the SYNC-enabled courses will be implemented in Ph.D. majors offered by the Division of Pastoral Ministries, including biblical exposition, evangelism, missions, and Great Commission studies; and the Division of Theological and Historical Studies, including church history and theology. The new apologetics Ph.D. major approved by NOBTS Trustees in June will be offered in this format once it receives ATS authorization. According to Ray, other NOBTS divisions may begin offering distance Ph.D. courses in the future.

There is still a short window of time for prospective students to apply for the spring semester, Ray said. The deadline for the full application process to the Ph.D. program for spring entry is Sept. 1. However, prospective students have until Dec. 1 to apply for study as a nondegree student next spring. This allows a student to begin taking SYNC-enabled classes while completing the full application process.

For more information about SYNC-enabled Ph.D. courses, contact the research doctoral program at (504) 816-8010 or visit www.nobts.edu/research.

