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Identifying Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

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Identifying Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

by

T. Ryan Baltrip

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Higher Education, College Teaching Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career, and Higher Education College of Education University of South Florida

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Keywords: online learning, distance education, online instructional design, teaching with technology, higher education administration

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DEDICATION

To dreamers and...
To my dad, who inspired one,
To my mother, who nurtured one,
To Megan, who loves and listens to one, and
To the God who saves and motivates one, who is making all things new, and who will wipe away every tear from our eyes and bring us into a reality where there is no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain...because the new has come (Rev. 21:1-8).
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ABSTRACT

Changes in computer and communication technology have sparked an educational revolution. For over 20 years, higher education, as a whole, has been adapting to the changing educational landscape. Christian theological education, which is not immune to changing educational realities, has also been adapting to decentralized educational tendencies and experiencing rapid growth in distance and online learning. Christian theological education appears to be a decade or so behind higher education in its contemporary adaptation to online learning. Questions that higher education began asking over a decade ago about online learning are now part of the contemporary conversation within Christian online theological education. One of those questions asks, “What are standards of quality for Christian online theological education?”

The purpose of this study was to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education as well as issues related to implementing these standards of quality. This study was originally planned as an explanatory, sequential mixed methods study. Due to circumstances encountered during the administration of the originally planned study, this study’s approach had to be adapted to the descriptive survey research method. This study was conducted among an expert sample of distance learning professionals from within Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accredited schools.
As indicated by distance learning professionals at ATS-accredited schools, this study: (a) identified 24 standards of quality for Christian online theological education, (b) discovered insights on how well these leaders perceive they are implementing quality standards, and (c) identified areas of both success and challenge when trying to implement quality standards in Christian theological education. These research findings led to two conclusions and produced seven key themes for Christian online theological education. The implications of these findings and suggestions for future research were discussed in order to help Christian theological education not only survive the educational revolution it is immersed in, but to thrive within it.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Changes in computer and Internet technology have sparked an educational revolution. Before the 1980s, higher education centralized around a physical location: the campus. If students desired an education, they had to attend the campus, going to classes held in specific locations. However, the educational landscape has changed (Hess, 2005a), with educational institutions increasingly becoming decentralized. They operate as hubs, flexible learning centers where education occurs through a variety of means. Students no longer have to attend classes on campus to gain an education. They can now take courses and entire programs online, take traditional on-campus classes, or anything in between.

Faculty no longer have to be in the same location as their students in order to teach them. Faculty can teach anywhere, anytime, and can make their instruction readily available to their students. In the contemporary milieu of higher education, technology is vitally integrated into students’ lives. Even when present in the face-to-face class, students use laptops, tablets, or mobile devices for any variety of functions. As a result, instructors face the constant challenge of trying to find creative new ways to integrate technology into the classroom.

The primary catalysts in the educational revolution have been the Internet and online learning. To see how Internet access and online learning have revolutionized education, one need only look at the last decade of online learning’s growth in higher education, as reported
by Allen and Seaman (2013)’s study of the past decade. Data for their report comes from both the Babson Survey Research Group and from the College Board. The two groups coordinated on their survey instruments and sample outreach. Collectively, their annual analysis surveys a large portion of active, degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States. Of the 4,527 institutions surveyed in 2012, 62.3% responded representing a high response rate.

Four major revolutionary trends emerge from Allen and Seaman’s last decade of analyzing online learning in higher education. First, there have been tremendous changes in student enrollment trends. In 2003, 1.6 million students took at least one online course. One decade later, in 2012, 6.7 million students took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013), meaning that the number of students taking at least one online course grew by 419% in ten years. In 2002, online learning accounted only for 9.6% of total enrollments, and in 2003, 11.7% of total enrollments were from online courses. By 2012, 32% of all enrollments in higher education came from online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Secondly, Chief Academic Officers’ (CAO’s) attitudes toward online learning have changed. In 2003, only 57% of CAOs believed learning outcomes via online learning were similar or superior to face-to-face learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013). By 2012, CAOs’ attitudes had shifted drastically. In 2012, 77% of CAOs affirmed that learning outcomes via online learning were similar or superior to face-to-face learning. CAOs’ attitudes have changed 20% in one decade.

The third major revolutionary change in higher education is that online learning is now a vital element in an educational institutions’ long-term strategy. By 2003, online learning had been present as a delivery mechanism in higher education for approximately a decade. Yet in
2003, when Allen and Seaman (2013) began surveying online learning trends in higher education, only 49% of CAOs believed that online learning was a critical component of long-term planning. However, by 2012, 69.1% claimed that online learning was a critical part of their long-term strategy. In one decade of research, Allen and Seaman saw a 20% percent increase in online learning’s strategic role in higher education.

Fourth, the essence of the faculty role and their pedagogical approach has expanded immensely due to revolutionary changes in communication and education technology. Faculty are no longer bound to just teaching in a physical classroom. They can teach virtually anytime, anywhere, through any means to students in any setting. However, while the nature of the faculty role has experienced revolutionary realities, faculty attitudes toward online learning have not changed much. Allen and Seaman (2013) discovered that faculty attitudes toward online learning have only grown in polarity from 2003 to 2012, with the number of faculty both agreeing and disagreeing with the value and legitimacy of online education growing (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Allen and Seaman’s decade of research suggests that faculty members are not neutral in their attitude toward online learning. In the past decade, faculty members have strengthened their views either for or against online learning.

While Allen and Seaman’s research reflects how online learning has been revolutionizing higher education, Christian theological education has been experiencing various changes as well. These changes can be seen among Christian theological schools accredited by the Association of the Theological Schools (ATS). ATS is the most prominent group of theological institutions and shares a similar accreditation reputation to higher education’s regional accrediting bodies. The Association of Theological Schools, as of 2012, consisted of 273
member graduate theological institutions. 65% of these graduate theological institutions are independently operated -- meaning they are not affiliated with a college or university -- while 19% are a school within a university and 16% are affiliated with a college (ATS, 2013).

Christian theological education, within ATS accredited schools, has been experiencing revolutionary realities over the past several years. Theological institutions have seen plateaued enrollments, declining resources, and an increasing need for flexible educational offerings (Aleshire, 2006; ATS, 2013). Yet the biggest revolutionary force in Christian theological education has also been the Internet. In 2012, 74,548 total students enrolled in a degree program at a theological institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Of the 74,548 total students enrolled, 20,128 students took an online course. Twenty-seven percent of all theological students now take an online course (E. Brown, personal communication, September 19, 2013). In the present and emerging world of Christian theological education, distance learning -- in particular, online learning -- makes sense. McKinney (2004) made five important claims related to technology and Christian higher education: (1) higher education has become decentralized via technology; (2) western society, as a whole, is transient and mobile; (3) educational options have expanded; (4) technology provides more contextualized educational delivery methods; and (5) students’ real-life needs and educational desires have changed. With these revolutionary factors affecting Christian theological education, online learning and distance learning options have emerged to meet students' needs.

Even the Association of Theological Schools has not been immune to revolutionary change. It has moved at rapid speed (especially for an accreditation agency) to adjust to the
revolutionized educational realities highlighted above (Aleshire, 2006). As early as 1990, ATS took its first step toward accepting distance education options by allowing correspondence and extension courses to count as credit. By 2000, they began accepting online courses for credit. By 2006, ATS allowed students to complete two-thirds of a Master of Divinity degree and 50% of a Master of Arts degree online. In 2012, ATS completed their evolution to these new revolutionary realities by adjusting their accreditation standards to allow for 100% online Master of Arts degrees and a petition for 100% online Master of Divinity degrees.

For theological institutions, administrators, and educators, living in the revolution has brought about unique challenges. Early on, as technology made new means of educational delivery possible, some theological educators spoke out against online learning. They said that online learning could not effectively teach the affective/spiritual domain, as well as that Christian theological education requires a live, physical presence between teacher and students (House, 2005; M. Lowe, 2010). Despite these theoretical objections from some in theological education, other theological educators chose to investigate online learning’s effectiveness. These educators examined various issues related to online learning -- pedagogical, theological, philosophical, social, technological, spiritual, etc. (Delamarter, 2005a; Heinemann, 2005a; Hess, 2005a; 2005b; M. Lowe, 2010; S. Lowe, 2010).

**Research Problem and Purpose of Study**

While many articles, publications, etc. talk about online learning in Christian theological education, at this point in time, no common standards of quality exist for graduate Christian online theological education. In contemporary adaptation to online learning, Christian
theological education appears to be a decade behind higher education. Many of the questions that higher education discussed during the mid-1990s concerning online learning began to surface in Christian theological education in the mid-2000s.

In the brief history of online learning, it took higher education approximately 5-10 years to move from debating whether or not online instruction was the equivalent to face-to-face education to establishing quality standards for it (Chaney, 2006; Sherry, 2003). By the time higher education viewed “no significant difference” between online and face-to-face education, educators began focusing on setting standards of quality for online learning (Chaney, 2006; Council of Regional Accrediting Commission, 2001; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Russell, 1999; Sherry, 2003).

While Christian theological education still debates various issues related to online learning, Christian theological institutions increasingly see the practical need for online (and blended) learning solutions. As online learning “comes of age” and continues its growth as an educational necessity within Christian theological education, Christian online educators need to research standards of excellence for its use as an educational method. Toward this end, this study focused on one research problem -- what are standards of quality in Christian online theological education? The purpose of this study is to identify standards of quality for online courses in Christian online theological education.
Significance of Study

Online learning is a vital, growing, and significant delivery method in Christian theological education. Historically, Christian online theological education is entering its second decade. In terms of accreditation, prior to 2012, ATS did not allow any Master’s degrees to be completed entirely online. However, in 2012, ATS began allowing schools to petition to offer their Master’s degrees in a 100% online delivery format. Approved institutions can have students earn their entire degree without ever visiting the physical campus. ATS has taken proactive, forward-looking, and strategic steps toward the future while theological institutions are increasingly recognizing the tectonic shifts afoot in the contemporary educational landscape.

This study emerges at a key point in the history of Christian online theological education. First, this study’s results can help provide online programs standards by which to measure quality in their online courses. Christian theological education has not yet defined what quality online learning is. This study helps Christian theological education move toward standards of quality for their online educational offerings. Second, this study’s results can help guide effective online course design and development in online theological programs. Third, this study helps establish a new line of research toward the issue of Christian online theological education. To this point in time, most publications have been anecdotal, limited in focus, or theoretical debates on the topic. This study provides a research focus to quality in Christian online theological education. Fourth, this study moves the debate in Christian theological education from “how is online learning comparable to face to face learning?” to “how can online learning be delivered with excellence and high quality?” As online learning in Christian
theological education moves into its second decade, research needs to help progress the conversation in this direction.

**Research Questions**

This study examined three research questions. The research questions are:

1. **What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?**

2. **To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?**

3. **What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?**

The goal of the first research question was to discover what a professional community of leaders identifies as standards of quality in Christian online theological education. The focus of the second research question was to discern how well the surveyed professional community practices what it believes and see if a gap exists between their beliefs and practice. The purpose of the third question was to discover factors associated with trying to implement the standards of quality identified in Christian online theological education.
Limitations

This study has four main limitations. First, this study was limited to Christian online theological education. This study did not focus on Christian education or Christian higher education. Instead, it focused on online learning within Christian graduate theological education (Chapter 2 elaborates on the differences among types of Christian education). This study did not seek to discover or identify quality standards within Christian higher education or even Christian theological education. Instead, it focused solely on identifying standards of quality within Christian online theological education.

Second, this study was all-inclusive within ATS accredited schools and did not differentiate among the different theological perspectives of its participants. Each unique theological perspective (e.g., Catholic, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian) has its own theological, philosophical, and pedagogical perspective with its own biases and benefits. This study did not aim at delineating specific theological perspectives towards online learning. Instead, this study targeted the collective perspective of the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the Association of Theological Schools toward standards of quality in online learning.

Third, this study relied on a small, expert sample of volunteers. The TTEG is a group of 270+ leaders in online learning at ATS schools. From this group, this study focused on subset of experts from the TTEG -- 78 Directors of Online Learning (and associated job titles) from ATS accredited schools associated with the TTEG. This study was limited to this expert sample and did not seek to sample all online learning directors at ATS accredited schools.

Fourth, as will be noted in Chapter 3, this study relied on a descriptive survey research method and did not produce the explanatory follow-up results desired. An explanatory,
sequential mixed methods research approach was originally planned for this study. Intended as such, the goal was to conduct a follow-up focus group interview – a second set of information – that would help explain the initial survey data received. However, after various scheduling difficulties and requests from participants to do a questionnaire instead, an adjustment had to be made to the research method during the administration of the follow-up portion of this study. The research method was adjusted to a descriptive survey research design in order to collect follow-up data. Even with this accommodation, the follow-up data gathered was still limited. The follow-up information received -- the second set of data that was to help explain the initial survey’s results -- was informative and insightful, but it ultimately lacked the research breadth needed to be conclusive.

**Delimitations**

This study has three main delimitations. First, this study did not examine faculty or students. Instead, it focused on a group of recognized experts in Christian online theological education. Second, this study was not a theological analysis of online learning. Third, this study did not rely on anecdotal evidence, instead, focusing primarily on research findings.

**Definition of Terms**

*Christian education* is education guided by distinct Christian aims, thought, and practice (Anthony, 2001; Groome, 1999; Pazmino, 2008; Wilhoit, 1986).
Christian higher education is post-secondary education guided by distinct Christian aims, thought, and practice (Holmes, 1978; Litfin, 2004). In the literature, “Christian college” and “Christian university” may be used as synonyms.

Christian online theological education is Christian theological education that has students complete 75% or more of their coursework through means of the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Christian theological education is post-baccalaureate higher education aimed at theological scholarship and serving religious constituencies (Association of Theological Schools, 2012b).

Distance education is institution-based, formal education where the students and the instructor are physically separated from one another and communication technology systems are used to connect learners, learning resources, and the instructor (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009).

Extension education is education that is delivered at an alternative educational site that is not part of a school’s main campus or part of an official satellite campus.

Online learning is learning that requires students to complete 75% of more of their coursework through means of the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Standard of quality is a principle, guideline, and/or an agreed upon way of doing something -- distilled wisdom established by people with expertise in their subject matter (Davis, 2010; Keeton, 2004; Moore, 2011; Sherry, 2003).
Summary

In the roughly two decades of its existence, online learning has brought about revolutionary changes within higher education. Not only has online learning changed higher education as a whole, it has also revolutionized Christian online theological education. While there has been much debate about the quality of online learning in Christian theological education, most of it has been anecdotal, rhetorical, or limited in scope. There has been no research conducted that examines what quality Christian online theological education is. This study aimed at identifying the standards that define quality in Christian online theological education. This research study’s significance is that it identifies standards of quality as recognized and articulated by a group of leaders within ATS schools. Furthermore, this study can guide Christian theological education as the field begins to study, define, and implement quality standards in online learning.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

The first step in establishing standards of quality in Christian theological education is examining the various sets of literature on the subject. Christian theological education has foundations and characteristics that set it apart from other forms of education. There are three different sets of literature that must be explored in order to discover these unique traits. First, this study surveyed the biblical, theological, philosophical, and spiritual foundations of Christian theological education. Second, this study examined online learning in Christian theological education to discover its particular history and the specific issues related to it. Lastly, this study explored how higher education has addressed standards of quality in online learning. Exploring each of these domains informed this research study’s development, implementation, and interpretation.

Christian Theological Education

Christian theological education is unique. It fits under the larger umbrella of Christian education yet focuses primarily on graduate theological ministerial preparation. Before highlighting the purpose of Christian theological education, Christian theological education must be adequately differentiated from (see Figure 1) and properly located within (see Table 1) other forms of Christian education.
**Christian Theological Education within Christian Education**

As illustrated in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 1, Christian education is a broad, inclusive term. It represents the entire spectrum of all educational activities that relate to the life of Christian faith. Various definitions have been given for what Christian education is (Anthony, 2001; Groome, 1999; Pazmino, 2008; Wilhoit, 1986; Yount, 2008). However, Christian education is merely an inclusive term for education that is guided by distinctly Christian aims, thoughts, and character. It can represent church-based education (primarily aimed at helping one to grow in a personal relationship with God), or it can refer to non-churched based education (e.g., Christian secondary school, Christian college, seminary). Christian education is a term that spans a lifetime -- ideally a part of one’s life from birth, guiding one throughout life’s journey, and leading one through death and into an eternal destiny (Willard, 1998). In any context, Christian education may be formal (with goals, assessments, etc.), or it may be informal. It can also be academic or non-academic.

**Figure 1.** Christian Theological Education within Christian Education.
As documented in Table 1, Christian higher education is post-secondary education guided by distinct Christian aims, thoughts, and character. Christian higher education is formal education that is inclusive of all post-secondary education (e.g., undergraduate, graduate, professional). Christian higher education includes various academic disciplines (similar to higher education in general). However, Christian higher education is driven by a different purpose than non-Christian institutions and aims to create a specific product. Christian higher education desires to achieve different goals/objectives as a result of its higher educational process.

Various Christian theologies exist and each Christian higher educational institution, group, association, etc. finds their foundational purpose in their own theological heritage. Yet they all seek to form a particular product -- an educated Christian, marked by spiritual, moral, and intellectual virtues with a proper self-knowledge (Holmes, 1978). This virtuous, educated Christian “product” is not limited to one academic field or career path. Instead, Christian higher education seeks to educate virtuous Christians who center their lives on Christ and inhabit all facets of culture as people who not only preserve it (salt) but who also call culture to its highest ideals (light) while living within it (Litfin, 2004; Matt. 5:16-17 New International Version).
Table 1. How Christian Theological Education is Different from Christian Education and Christian Higher Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian education</th>
<th>Christian higher education</th>
<th>Christian Theological education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>Church-based and/or educational institution</td>
<td>Educational institution</td>
<td>Educational institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>Spanning all of life</td>
<td>Post-secondary; typically collegiate years</td>
<td>Graduate professional school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formality</strong></td>
<td>Formal and/or informal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td>Academic and/or non-academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Educate for life of faith</td>
<td>Educate for life in culture</td>
<td>Educate for life of vocational service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product</strong></td>
<td>Christian character prepared for life in culture</td>
<td>Formally educated Christian character prepared for life and career in culture</td>
<td>Formally educated Christian character prepared for vocational religious service in culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Christian theological education is a specific type of Christian higher education. Christian theological education primarily focuses on formal, post-baccalaureate higher education. Christian theological educational institutions may be independent schools/seminaries or be an academic school within a larger university system. While other accreditation agencies exist, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is the oldest, largest, and most influential accrediting body of theological institutions in the United States and Canada. For most Christian theological schools, ATS accreditation is as vital institutionally as regional accreditation. Furthermore, many ATS seminaries hold dual accreditation with both ATS and a regional accreditation agency. The overarching goal of ATS affiliated schools is to glorify God through theological scholarship and ministry preparation. The products created by Christian theological education are primarily vocational scholars, ministers, or missionaries who serve their religious constituencies.
The Purpose of Christian Theological Education

Having located Christian theological education as a particular type of Christian higher education, its specific purposes need further elaboration. Miller (2012) summarized that the purpose of Christian theological education is “to develop a type of wisdom, based on the church and its tradition that enables persons to take leadership in their own religious tradition. Consequently, Christian theological education develops the student’s capacity for theological reflection” (p. 397). Kelsey (1992) summarized seminary’s aim more succinctly— to know God truly (p. 41). Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson (1956) claimed that both seminary and church should increase the love of God and neighbor, each working on different educational levels with the seminary aiming at graduate Christian theological education.

Christian theological education includes many things within its general purpose. Seminaries all focus on holistic development that includes the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions of formation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). ATS stated the Master of Divinity degree, which is the most common ministerial degree for ministerial formation, requires students to be educated (or developed) in four areas: (1) religious heritage, (2) cultural context, (3) personal and spiritual formation, and (4) capacity for ministerial and public leadership (ATS, 2012a).

The theological school’s curriculum focuses on preparing ministers for ministry. In 1909, B.B. Warfield said the theological school’s curriculum should produce five things:

1) A sound biblical critic,

2) A defender of the Christian faith,
3) An able and sound divine [meaning that students have a deep spiritual knowledge and understanding],

4) A useful preacher and faithful pastor, and

5) A man qualified to exercise discipline and to take part in the government of the Church in all its judicatories.

Warfield added an admonition that “theological curriculum should provide for the serious mastery of the several branches of theological science. A comprehensive and thorough theological training is the condition of a qualified ministry. When we satisfy ourselves with a less comprehensive and thorough theological training, we are only condemning ourselves to a less qualified ministry” (as cited in Meeter, 1970, p. 373).

Contemporary Christian theological education, as defined by the Association of Theological Schools, serves a distinct purpose. Like most graduate schools, Christian theological institutions primarily focus on post baccalaureate higher education. However, unlike most graduate schools, every Christian theological institution serves a special “theological” purpose. They exist to serve a community (or communities) of faith (ATS, 2012b, p. G-3). Christian theological institutions are typically guided by a specific theological vision of the world and exist to prepare vocationally-called ministers to serve faith communities who share that same theological vision. ATS summarized a Christian theological institution’s purpose by stating that their educational programs “should continue the heritage of theological scholarship, attend to the religious constituencies served, and respond to the global context of religious service and Christian theological education,” (ATS, 2012b, p. G-3).
Contemporary degree programs at theological schools fall into four categories: (1) basic programs oriented toward ministerial leadership, (2) basic programs oriented toward general theological studies, (3) advanced programs oriented toward ministerial leadership, and (4) advanced programs primarily oriented toward theological research and teaching (ATS, 2012a). Regardless of the specific program, theological schools strive to continue the heritage of scholarship, remain faithful to the religious constituencies served, and respond to the global context of religious service and Christian theological education.

Contemporary Christian theological education faces issues and complexities unparalleled in its history, with seminaries having to shift their contextual goals and aims over the last 100 years. As Miller (2012) stated, “Nineteenth-century seminary educators were deeply concerned with the doctrinal foundations of their own denominations. In the early 20th century, seminaries argued that they were educating people for a modern profession” (p. 396-397). One can see this shift by looking at the difference between the stated purposes of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1909 and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2002 in Table 2 below.
Table 2. Comparing the Purpose of Two Seminaries Nearly 100 Years Apart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Form men for the gospel ministry</td>
<td>1. Fervor for the greater glory of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide the Church an adequate supply and succession of ministers</td>
<td>2. Unconditional obedience to the Lordship of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Unite those in ministerial office</td>
<td>3. Manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Give more advantage to ministers to cultivate piety and preparation</td>
<td>4. Biblical fidelity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide for the Church, men who will defend the faith</td>
<td>5. Evangelical conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Provide for the Church, humble, enlightened, and zealous ministers</td>
<td>6. Great commission passion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Promote harmony and unity among ministers of the Church</td>
<td>7. Devotional intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lay a foundation of lasting friendships</td>
<td>8. Personal integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Preserve the unity of the church for doctrine and church government</td>
<td>9. God-honoring family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. To found a nursery for missionaries to the heathen, and to such as are destitute of the stated preaching</td>
<td>10. Affection for the local church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Endeavor to raise up a succession of men qualified for and devoted to the work of the gospel ministry</td>
<td>11. Affinity for the SBC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information on Princeton Seminary taken from Warfield (1909) and on Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from Mohler (2002).

Compared to the aims of seminaries in the past, the contemporary seminary has a more complex cultural task and must prepare a more balanced, well-rounded product. Seminaries must try to achieve more advanced aims and purposes while students have less time to devote to learning, have less ability to earn a residential education, institutions face diminishing resources, and faculty are forced to carry heavier loads (Aleshire, 2006; Hess, 2005b).
Distance Learning in Christian Theological Education

To move toward standards of quality in Christian online theological education, it is necessary to not only examine Christian theological education’s foundations but also distance learning within Christian theological education. In order to gain perspective on this area, this section examines the somewhat unusual history of distance learning in Christian theological education and the minefield of issues that lie within it. The examination of these issues begins with a survey of distance learning’s history in Christian theological education.

History of Distance Learning in Christian Theological Education

Distance learning has an unusual history in Christian theological education. Christian theological education exists to train vocationally-called Christian ministers. Christian theological education trains ministers so that they might be able to equip their fellow Christians to love God and others as well as fulfill the Great Commission. The Great Commission calls Christians to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20 New International Version). In Acts 1:8, Jesus gives His followers a rough sketch of how they should go about fulfilling the Great Commission. Acts 1:8 (New International Version, 2011) says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The rough outline of this commission from Acts 1:8 is for Christ’s followers to spread their ministries in a pattern, starting from (a) the location they are in to (b) expanding out to national boundaries and nearby states and nations, and then (c) to take the message to all peoples and all nations. The outline is not a binding strategy, but does emphasize a Christian perspective to “go” and “send” the message out.
While the Great Commission calls Christians to start where they are at and expand their reach outward, oddly enough, the history of distance learning in theological formed in a reverse pattern. Acts 1:8 outlines a move from (a) Jerusalem (regional context) to (b) Judea and Samaria (national context) to (c) ends of the earth (global context). However, the history of distance learning in theology followed an opposite pattern (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Reverse Great Commission Pattern in History of Distance Learning in Christian Theological Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Great Commission</th>
<th>History of Distance Learning in Christian Theological Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Jerusalem -- immediate regional context</td>
<td>C Ends of the earth -- global missionary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Judea and Samaria -- broader regional and national context</td>
<td>B Judea and Samaria -- distance (extension) theological education in U.S. and Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Ends of the earth -- global context</td>
<td>A Jerusalem -- online learning integrated into immediate institutional life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distance learning in Christian theological education began with (c) the ends of the earth (focusing on global missionary education). Then, it moved to (b) Judea and Samaria (focusing on allowing students in the United States and Canada who could attend campus for the duration of their program to complete a degree via distance learning). Lastly, it expanded backward into (a) Jerusalem (integrating distance and online learning as normal, regular options within Christian theological education). To describe the history of distance learning in Christian theological education, one merely needs to reverse the Great Commission order of Acts 1:8 (as demonstrated in Table 3).
Ends of the Earth -- Missionary Education

Distance learning in Christian theological education began primarily as a means to achieve missionary education. Theological educators have been experimenting with distance education since 1881. They were among distance education’s early pioneers. The first known record of any type of distance Christian theological education was in 1881, when William Rainey Harper at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois developed a correspondence Hebrew course (Harper, 1885). He later implemented a broader correspondence education initiative at the University of Chicago. While the Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois never made broader plans for systematic, institutional implementation of correspondence education, the University of Chicago implemented correspondence learning more broadly. The second foray into distance learning came in at 1901. R.A. Torrey established Moody Correspondence School at the Moody Bible Institute (Maddix, Estep, & Lowe, 2012). They began by offering two classes. Forty-four years later, they had expanded to 17 courses. However, it was not until 1997 that Moody implemented a serious, systematic plan for distance learning options when they began offering a Bachelor of Science degree online, available under a new arm: Moody Distance Learning.

Distance learning options may have a 133-year history in Christian theological education. However, for the overwhelming majority of that history, distance learning was not considered a viable means for “real” education. Until the rise of Christian theological education by extension, distance learning primarily happened through correspondence courses. It was rightly viewed as a vastly inferior, second rate education for those who could not make it to
campus. It mainly focused on using mail, radio, and/or video recordings to deliver theological curriculum to missionaries taking correspondence courses.

Meyers (2007) suggested that Theological Education by Extension (TEE) began as a serious, systematic educational endeavor in Guatemala in the 1960s. TEE primarily focused on educating missionaries at a distance. TEE was a blend between correspondence course materials and the added human element of having professors travel to a central location in an international country to hold intensive classroom experiences. It was the first “blended learning” model in Christian theological education, and it was moderately successful. The model inspired other schools and denominations to consider how it could be adapted to bring courses to places with limited access to Christian theological education (Meyers, 2007). Even though the model existed and distance education became an invaluable tool for extending education (primarily to those on international mission fields), it was continually perceived as a second rate counterpart to “real” on-campus education (Raybon, 2012; Seevers, 1993).

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the primary accrediting body for theological higher education in the United States and Canada, began studying distance education formally in 1974. Even though ATS later became a proponent of innovative expansion of Christian theological education, at that time, an ATS official expressed his concerns about the “deschooling tendencies” of TEE, reflecting a larger disapproval of distance learning in Christian theological education (Aleshire, 2010). This attitude persisted even in the late 1990s. Even as many institutions of public education began to develop more robust distance learning programs (primarily focused on online learning), most seminaries were lethargic, remaining hesitant and slow to implement online learning programs (Amos, 1999).
Judea and Samaria -- Distance Education Comes to the USA and Canada

With the success of new extension models like TEE, Christian theological education by extension slowly became a viable means of education in both the United States in Canada. Theological institutions have had to adapt to changing educational needs among their students. As the educational level of the American public has increased through the 20th Century, many churches and pastors decided that an educated pastorate would be the new norm (Hess, 2005a). Yet a large population of theological students found it difficult to stop mid-career and relocate their families to attend theological institutions (Hess, 2005a). As one author noted, “Theological study and the practice of ministry are no longer sequential for most students, but simultaneous,” (Ricciuti, 2003, p.147). Changing student needs and a growing educational culture forced Christian theological education to begin exploring distance education options.

Two major steps brought distance learning into the mainstream of Christian theological education. The first major step toward accepting distance learning via extension education was making it a viable means of earning course credit. In 1990, ATS adopted its first distance education policy (Aleshire, 2006). At that time, the policy allowed seven hours of credit earned by extension education to count toward a degree program. Extension education provided theological institutions with a distance learning option (admittedly minimal) that still required students to come to campus eventually for the majority of their program. Theological educators -- even now, but especially then -- struggled to see how distance education could achieve theological education’s goals if the instructor was not physically present in the same location with the students (House, 2005).
Extension centers became an answer to the distance learning challenge. As a result, theological institutions began opening extension centers in various regions across the United States. They sent their on-campus professors to these extension centers to teach distance students (often at great expense but at least with a sincere desire to provide the same quality of teaching that on-campus students received). Extension centers quickly grew popular among theological institutions. To see how quickly, one need only look at how fast ATS standards changed. By 2000, only a decade after allowing the first extension education credit hours, ATS adopted new standards which allowed students to complete their entire Master of Divinity (ATS’s primary degree for ministerial preparation) via extension education.

The second major step in distance education’s proliferation within Christian theological education in the United States and Canada revolved around online learning. No other institution or organization influenced this developing trend in Christian theological education as much as the Lilly Endowment. In 1998, the Lilly Endowment began supporting “teaching through technology” initiatives. The Lilly Endowment’s support helped institutions build and/or improve their technological infrastructure. In 1998, the Lilly Endowment began awarding grants to 72 different Christian theological institutions through its Technology for [Christian] Theological Teaching initiative. Each grant recipient received $300,000 to improve computer technologies and online resources at their school (Of wikis, Moodle, blogs, 2008). The initial grants focused on technology in the classroom and in training faculty on how to use technology in teaching. However, the Lilly Endowment also made another strategic move that helped theological institutions prepare for the digital educational environment. In 2002, Lilly issued another round of grants. ATS, funded by the additional disbursements, studied the results of
the Lily Endowment’s previous grants. The main result ATS discovered was that theological institutions began wiring their campus with the technological infrastructure they needed for the digital age and were developing a technological base that they could build on. Even though newer wireless technologies and other changes made technological infrastructure for institutions much more accessible, cheaper, and effective than before, the Lilly Endowment sparked a beachhead movement into online learning, and the movement grew quickly from there.

Jerusalem -- Distance Learning Becomes Vital and Strategic in Christian Theological Education

Over the last decade, distance learning has become a vital, integrated, and strategic part of Christian theological education. Distance learning options have grown in popularity within Christian theological education. As distance learning has grown within Christian theological education, theological institutions have benefited in several ways. They have seen:

1. Greater access to prospective students who are not currently able to attend;
2. Increased revenue from new students;
3. Opportunity to reach a more global market; and
4. An opportunity to explore new pedagogies for online and face-to-face learning (Osborn, 2006).

Informally, theological educators claim that in the last twenty years it has become more difficult to gather theological students together in one location for any type of formal Christian theological educational training (Hollon & Hammon, 2004; MacLeod, 2008; Raybon, 2012;
Reber, 2010). More formally, ATS reports that 27% of all theological students (or 20,128 of 74,548 students) took at least one online class in the 2011-2012 academic year (E. Brown, personal communication, September 19, 2013). With such a large percentage of the theological student population needing distance learning options, online learning quickly became a mainstream option within Christian theological education -- whether theological educators liked it or not. The landscape of Christian theological education changed and digital technologies made distance learning more educationally viable. As a result, theological institutions have had to change.

Clearly, Christian theological education has had to adapt. While many public higher educational institutions quickly adopted online learning, most theological institutions were slow to implement it (Amos, 1999). However, as the needs and demands of the contemporary students quickly woke theological institutions out of their slumber, they were forced to either gloss over, reluctantly accept, or work through their issues with distance education and online learning.

The Association of Theological Schools has demonstrated tremendous leadership within Christian theological education by adapting quickly and opening the accreditation pathway for online learning. ATS has adjusted quickly for an accreditation agency making online learning a viable educational solution for students and institutions (Aleshire, 2006). In this respect, ATS has made tremendous progress over the past decade. In 2000, ATS only allowed a few online learning courses to count toward degrees. By 2006, they only required one-third of a Master of Divinity degree or 50% of a Master of Arts degree to be completed on-campus. By 2012, ATS adjusted accreditation standards. The 2012 ATS adjusted standards allowed schools to offer
100% M.A. degrees and 100% M.Div. degrees, if schools petitioned and successfully demonstrated they were capable of offering the educational equivalent of the on-campus degree (Aleshire, 2006; ATS, 2012a).

**Issues in Christian Online Theological Education**

Even though ATS has adjusted quickly and opened the doors for online learning in theological institutions, and even though the contemporary needs of theological needs demonstrate a desire for it, theological educators and theological institutions have a variety of issues with online learning. For any form of online learning to have a significant place in education, it has to prove it is more than just a convenient electronic medium that one can gain content through (Garrison, 2011). In Christian theological education, any form of distance education has to prove it can achieve theological education’s goals. Online learning has an especially hard road, as it must deal with the constant physical separation between teacher and students. For Christian online theological education, there has definitely been a strong bias toward viewing it as a second rate counterpart to on-campus education (Raybon, 2012; Severs, 1993). Even though many of these objections come from mere opinion, uninformed perceptions, uncritical bias, assumption, and/or lack of knowledge, that does not dispel or deny the fact that Christian online theological education has issues it must face and address (Delamarter, 2005a; Hess, 2005a; S. Lowe, 2010; MacLeod, 2008; Patterson, 1996; Raybon, 2012; Rovai, 2003; Shore, 2007; Snyder, 2007). Eight categories of issues that have arisen within Christian online theological education are examined below.
Theological Issues

As one might expect, there are theological issues with Christian online theological education. The main theological concerns related to online learning center on the incarnation, anthropology, and the nature of discipleship. Some theological educators question the incarnational aspects of online learning (House, 2005). Sasse (1998) claimed that Christian theological education models “should be embodied, fully human education, where there is personal contact between teacher and student (p. 37).” The root of such incarnational objections to online learning can be found in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The orthodox Christian doctrine of Christ’s incarnation holds that God took on a human body and lived among human beings in bodily form (John 1:14 New International Version). With Jesus Himself taking on human form and having a physical presence among humanity, some theological educators -- like Sasse and House -- believe that all theological education be incarnational (“in the flesh”). On the surface, “incarnational” objections seem very doctrinally based. However, these objections often hide behind one particular doctrine -- the incarnation -- in lieu of further holistic biblical or theological analysis.

Other educators object to online learning from the perspective of theological anthropology. For example, Sasse (1998) also argued that distance learning is “solitary learning” and does not allow students to maintain a real human interaction. The general theological anthropological argument claims that since human beings are inseparable from their bodies, education loses its nature and quality when our bodies are absent or distance from the learning process (Kelsey, 1992). This view maintains a coherent theological view of a person as a whole and does not divide any aspect of the human unit. As a result, learning
happens best when teacher and student are bodily present with one another. To such a perspective, anything that tears at this anthropological view, or what Naidoo (2012) calls “theologies of community,” is an unworthy means of Christian education.

Behind both of these theological objections are several errors. First is a faulty assumption. One may be right to emphasize the need for incarnational presence within Christian theological education (modeled after Jesus’ incarnation, where Christians believe God took on flesh and lived among human beings). However, it is a faulty assumption to believe that in-person, on-campus education by default achieves an incarnational “level” of pedagogical presence. In fact, in-person, on-campus education can be less personal, less interactive, and more disembodied than online learning. As Hess (2005a) indicated, “We [theological educators] actually have more to fear and critique in our current classroom practices of disembodied learning than we do from our experimentation with online learning” (p. 68). With the incarnation of Christ, God takes on human flesh and “dwells among us,” but the incarnate Jesus does more than that. With the incarnation, Christ fully identifies with, relates to, connects with, and becomes one with humanity. The reality of the incarnation is not just a mere presence with human beings but a full identification with humanity. Any form or method of education may or may not be incarnational in this sense. Even though the teacher may be physically present, he or she may not connect and truly be with the students in an incarnational sense. It is faulty to assume that physical presence equals incarnational teaching. There is no guarantee that any pedagogical method or delivery means actually resembles or achieves an incarnational presence.
Second, the educational abilities of online learning are underestimated. Research has examined whether a true, vital, and connected interaction can occur in the online learning process in both higher education (Palloff & Pratt, 2007a) and Christian theological education (Delamarter, 2005b; Heinemann, 2007; M. Lowe, 2010; S. Lowe, 2010). The research consensus is that online learning can achieve an incarnational presence that does not disembodied the human being or the educational process. If an educational method demonstrates it can foster an incarnational presence equal to, if not better than, on-campus education, and if it does not radically divide human beings, then how can one object to it (Hess, 2005; S. Lowe, 2010)?

Research on online learning (as well as Christian research on it) has demonstrated that the online medium is just as capable of achieving an incarnational teaching presence as traditional in-person education (Delamarter, 2005a; Hess, 2005; M. Lowe, 2010, S, Lowe, 2012). The online medium does not necessarily eliminate incarnational presence. Whether or not online learning (or on-campus teaching) accomplishes an incarnational presence has more to do with the instructor than the medium.

Online learning can be an “incarnational” educational method. As referenced above, research demonstrates that faculty can be just as connected to students in an online class as they would be in a face-to-face class (Heinemann, 2005a). The medium is not the limiting factor (Baker, 2010). Online learning has demonstrated it can be an incarnational pedagogical method. Also, online learning tools have become vital for encouraging deeper levels of learning, critical reflection, and incarnational presence in blended learning or flipped classroom pedagogy. When designed and used well, blended learning or flipped classroom pedagogies, which incorporate some online learning technologies, can encourage a deeper incarnational
level than classical on-campus teaching (Naidoo, 2012). An online class with an actively involved instructor who engages his/her students through the online medium, provides timely feedback, and actively involves their students in their learning certainly seems more “incarnational” than the traditional lecture-oriented on-campus class, which may only interact through a book review, term paper, midterm, and final exam.

Philosophical Issues

Based on the literature and the debates that have ensued, theological educators also have philosophical issues with online learning. Some may think the biggest issues for theological educators are merely theological, technological or pedagogical (Raybon, 2012). However, even though they may not be as clearly apparent, philosophical issues are just as important within Christian online theological education.

Much of the philosophical debate for theological educators centers on the “realness” of digital communication. One biblical scholar from Princeton Seminary displayed strong philosophical objections by stating: “A crucial component of education is the live, physical exchange between students with each other and with faculty. We do not want to get away from that. Therefore, any technology we implement here is for in-class, on-campus use. None of our regular classes will be offered as distance-learning classes” (S. Lowe, 2010, p. 1). While there is undoubtedly a difference in the nature and physicality of digital communication, that should not necessarily discount the credibility of it. Contemporary culture uses technology for dating, shopping, relating, talking, and to experience a vast range of human interactions. Online communication has a different composition. Communication via online means (at
present) is two-dimensional, mediated via electronic means, typically involves physical separation between persons, and causes one to lose the sense of a personal touch. However, online communication can electronically mediate a two-dimensional visualization, allow audio to be transmitted, present an instant audio-visual interaction between persons otherwise separated by distance, and allow the essential exchange of information in a variety of forms (e.g., email communication, financial exchange, and video chat). At present, online human interaction may lose some aspects of personal communication by the very nature of the medium. However, online interactions are capable of facilitating the most vital aspects of human communication, especially when it comes to the educational communication necessary to encourage learning (Heinemann, 200ba; S. Lowe, 2010).

The other major philosophical issue concerning Christian online theological education relates to the purpose and goal of Christian theological education. Christian theological education’s purpose is to: (1) transmit theological knowledge, (2) develop professional skills, (3) promote personal and spiritual growth, and (4) foster Christian commitment to service through spiritual formation (Messer, 1995). Some educators do not believe that online learning can achieve the last three of Messer’s purposes. Some theological educators assume “affective” growth can only happen through an in-person environment (Osborn, 2006). They understand how online learning can be a means of transmitting information, but they are unsure how the spiritual/affective element can be accomplished online. Graham (2003) examined how online learning can educate for knowledge and understanding in the cognitive domain while also encouraging growth and capacity in the affective domain. His research shows that affective learning outcomes are achieved via online learning. The key factors for achieving affective
learning outcomes are: (a) designing the course to achieve affective goals and (b) using good online pedagogical methods when teaching online. When these two factors are present in online learning, affective learning goals are achieved (Graham, 2003; Osborn, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007b).

While there may be debate on achieving “affective” goals via online theological learning, there is another major philosophical issue -- the philosophies undergirding online educational practice. Online learning is prone to constructivist pedagogical approaches (Raybon, 2012). One constructivist cliché concerning professor’s roles moves them “from a sage on the stage to a guide on the side.” This saying emphasizes how the professor’s role moves from knowledge transmission to facilitating learning experiences. Constructivist influences can also be seen in the terminology associated with online learning, terms like: collaboration, active learning, readiness, learner-centered, reflection, dialog, scaffolding, and interaction (Byer, Clark, Mahfood, & Welch, 2002; A.Herrington, J.Herrington, Oliver, Stoney, & Willis, 2001; Ko, 2005; Raybon, 2012).

Christian theological education has largely avoided student-centered approaches, having a bias towards a teacher-centered pedagogical perspective. In one sense, teacher-centered approaches could just be historically inherited teaching means from the Reformation, “the way it has always been done” that keeps being passed down through generations of teachers (Kelsey, 1992). For others, a high theological view of the Bible’s inspiration, an important issue among various traditions (Anthony, 2001; Kelsey, 1992; Litfin, 2004; Pazmino, 2008), may be part of the reason for this pedagogical bias. However, a high theological view of the Bible’s inspiration does not force a teacher to follow a top-down, teacher-centered
approach to learning. Theological views do not dictate inherently that teachers merely dispense truth via spoken words to students who listen passively. Allowing for student-centered or decentralized pedagogical approaches does not necessarily undermine theology, a view of God’s inspiration and authority, or even diminish the authority of the teacher in education. Historically, however, any educational approach that even hinted at a teacher moving from the “sage on the stage” role has been viewed with theological suspicion (Yount, 2008). It does bear suggesting that theological educators need not jump all the way to student-centered approaches. For Christian theological education, there is likely a continuum and a happy medium between teacher-centered and student-centered learning approaches, with individual perspectives varying (Delamarter, 2005b). Online learning merely serves as a catalyst for debating teacher-centered or student-centered learning approaches within Christian theological education as it typically requires more facilitation and guidance through a pre-developed curriculum.

Another philosophical issue in Christian online theological education is the nature of educational paradigms. Christian theological education is prone to variations between static and fluid paradigms of educational practice. Some may view Christian theological education as merely transmitting static content to students, passing down the truth that has been handed down by the saints for ages, through the same static educational means used in the past (Anthony, 2001; Pazmino, 2008). The other extreme perceives content as static, but views the educational means as more fluid in how they are used. This perspective believes the message does not change, but the means do (Graham, 2008). This static vs. fluid approach is similar to Pazmino’s “preparadigmatic” approach to Christian education. Pazmino (2008) viewed
educational means and methods as continually being in such a state of flux that they supersede any paradigm. For him, educational approaches adapt and are beyond the bounds of fitting neatly into any particular philosophical paradigm. Philosophically, theological educators fall somewhere along a static vs. fluid continuum of educational practice. Those who land more on the static side of educational practice typically take a teacher-centered approach and those who land more on the fluid side of educational practice adapt to changes in means and methods to accomplish educational goals. Either side may object philosophically to online learning, although those who have a more fluid approach to educational methods tend to object less (Delamarter, 2004; Heinemann, 2005b; Hess, 2005a; M. Lowe, 2010; S. Lowe, 2010; Pazmino, 2008).

**Spiritual Issues**

Christian theological education aims at spiritual ends. There is little surprise that spirituality is an issue for Christian online theological education. “How can online learning foster spiritual development?” is a major question for theological educators. Roehrig (2008) listed personal development in online environments (both spiritually and socially) as one of the three main issues with online theological learning. Once again, concerns over spirituality reflect theological educators’ assumptions about physical presence and people needing to gather in one location.

**Assumptions related to physical presence in spiritual development.** Many theological educators assume that physical presence is necessary for spiritual development. Theological educators assume the affective domain can only be taught (or caught) when teachers and
students are in one location (Osborn, 2006). They assume that online learning is one-dimensional (Blier, 2008). They also assume that being in residence with a community is *sine qua non* of good education (Senior & Weber, 1994). They may have methodological assumptions, believing spirituality only grows when an authoritative teacher presents content in the physical presence of students.

Even though theological educators may have assumptions about spiritual development, their classical ideal may not be reality. The classical image of an isolated community of faith and learning cloistered away from the world and dedicated to study and spiritual growth rarely exists in the contemporary world (Marsden, 1996). Most students have families, careers, and participate in churches -- typically the focal point of spiritual development (Jewel, 2005; Patterson, 1996; Reissner, 1999). With the average seminary student being older, working, having a family, and trying to go to school, the theological student population resembles many of the characteristics of community college students: transient and in need of educational solutions that fit their real-life needs and schedules. Due to these student factors, the classical “ideal” of study and spirituality in a theologically pure and isolated campus environment is not even the reality of contemporary on-campus Christian theological education.

**Spiritual development from a distance in Scripture.** In Scripture, one sees that spiritual growth is not limited to physical presence or location. In the Old Testament, God was not physically present with people at all, yet He taught them through mediated means (Genesis 9:17; Exodus 20:21; Exodus 33:7; 2 Samuel 12:1-31; Job 40:1—Job 42:6). Even some of the people that God worked through in the Old Testament—like the prophets—were not physically present with people or the nation. Yet people in distance locations heard their truth (Amos 1:1-
2; Amos 3:1; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Isaiah 37:21; Jeremiah 25:1-2; 2 Kings 19:20). In the New Testament, even though Jesus’ primary ministry was with those in His presence, He sometimes ministered from a distance as well (John 4:43-54; Mark 11:13; Matthew 8:5-13). Distance learning was definitely not foreign to Paul and the early Christian community. They quickly realized that they could not maintain a physical presence with the churches they were trying to reach and teach. To remedy the spiritual and education issue, they used letters, the epistles, (which were the distance learning means available at that time) to encourage spiritual development (Ephesians 1:1-2; Galatians 6:11-18; Philippians 4:4-23; Romans 16). Throughout the New Testament, we see the Holy Spirit moving and working in people’s lives even though He has no physical body and therefore is not limited to one physical location (Acts 2:4; Acts 9:17; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Hebrews 6:4; Roman 5:5; Romans 15:13; Titus 3:5). These examples demonstrate a foundational principle for Christian online theological education: spiritual growth in different locations without a physical presence is consistent with biblical spiritual learning.

**Research showing spiritual development can happen via online learning.** Apart from scriptural teachings, research has demonstrated that spiritual development happens in Christian online theological education. Mary Lowe (2010) conducted an inventory to examine if and to what extent spiritual formation occurs in Christian theological education, yet many questions remain because of the lack of known details of her study. She used the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS) developed by Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1993) as her research instrument to measure various aspects of spiritual development. M. Lowe (2010) argued that spiritual development can be best understood “from an integrated perspective” (p. 4). The
integrated perspective recognizes that various factors inter-mixing and synthesizing together encourage spiritual development. For example, there is an intermixing of curriculum in most theological courses: instructional presence, interactions between peers and faculty, the faith community a student is in, and various inter- and intrapersonal factors. In her study, M. Lowe (2010) found that online learning was just as effective as on-campus learning at encouraging the intermixing of all dimensions that encourage spiritual development. Furthermore, her analysis revealed that there are several factors which contribute to spiritual formation (p.4).

Mary Lowe’s study (2010) revealed that spiritual formation not only happens in online courses, but she also identified three pedagogical practices that helped encourage spiritual development in the online medium. First, spiritual formation was encouraged by fostering increased knowledge, community development, and personal growth. Second, online learning positively affected spiritual development to the degree that quality of peer and faculty relationships happened. Third, online learning encouraged social and spiritual dimensions through course content and practical application.

Blier’s (2008) literature review would also agree with Mary Lowe’s (2010) conclusions -- that online learning is not one-dimensional. However, concerning spiritual development, M. Lowe concluded that there is no “silver bullet” in any form of Christian theological education, whether online or in a classroom. Instead, spiritual formation is more complex and develops from an interplay of factors and contexts. Significantly, she reveals that even though it is a complex, integrated process, online students were just as likely to grow spiritually as on-campus students (M. Lowe, 2010).
Once one agrees spiritual growth can happen in online learning environments, the major question becomes, “how do you do it?” Should it be formal or informal? What role should the theological institution play? What factors matter most and actually encourage spiritual development online (S. Lowe, 2010)? Many of these larger questions are beyond the scope of this study. However, as this study focuses on standards of quality in Christian online theological education, it does help discover different factors that encourage spiritual development in online learning.

**Student perceptions of spiritual development in online learning.** Before we dive further into how online learning can foster spiritual development, we must first recognize that all Christian theological education benefits from one significant reality—student perception. Using a population of graduate students, Rovai, Baker, and Cox (2008) conducted a study that investigated the sense of community and perceived learning in on-campus and online courses at both a Christian university and a state university. Their results suggested that the Christian ethos that students bring into their education influences all facets of their learning experience. Rovai, Baker, and Cox Jr. (2008) found that students' perception of Christian theological education makes all the difference in how students view the quality of community, learning, and development. Students enter Christian theological education expecting to receive a high level of Christian theological education. While a similar study has not been conducted among seminary students, one might anticipate that “Divinely called” students studying to enter vocational ministry would be “Divinely motivated” in their studies. Within the worldview of their belief system, theological students begin their Christian theological education divinely
called and divinely motivated to study and grow. As a result, Christian theological education starts with a great pedagogical advantage.

**Instructional presence as key factor in spiritual development.** While students may come into online learning divinely motivated, it is evident from the current literature in the field that the key factor for encouraging spiritual development is instructional presence during an online course. Instructional presence can mean many things, but Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer’s work (2001) highlighted how instructors need to engage students cognitively, pedagogically, and socially in order to achieve an instructional presence in any course. This means that the true issue is whether an instructor achieves an instructional presence, regardless of the medium. When designing an online course, an instructor has every chance to make a cognitive and pedagogically sound learning experience, thus achieving instructional presence, which, for theological educators, is vital for encouraging spiritual development. However, in order for the presence to truly be achieved, instructors must also engage their online students cognitively and pedagogically during the course.

Research indicates that instructors who maintain an instructional presence during their online courses significantly influence whether or not spiritual development occurs. Bates (2000) found that even though online learning is stereotyped as a high-tech correspondence course with little interaction between instructors and students, it does not have to fulfill this impersonal, disconnected stereotype. Bates (2000) discovered that the instructor is the single most important factor in fostering online spiritual development and creating effective online learning experiences for students. In essence, instructional practices determine how much online learning resembles a high-tech correspondence course. The medium itself is not the
determining factor for whether or not spiritual development happens online. The determining factor is whether the instructor aims at, plans for, encourages, and facilitates spirituality through his or her instructional presence in the online course. These findings also support the focus of this research – that instructional presence is a key factor in quality online learning.

**Advantages of online learning in spiritual development.** Online learning actually has some advantages over on-campus education that can enable it to promote spiritual development. For instance, online learning allows students to remain immersed in their real-life context, rather than being isolated on a seminary campus for their studies. Hannaford (2012) argued that online and blended learning options are best for spiritual and ministerial formation because these distance models develop spirituality while the students are engaged working in real-life communities and contexts. Hannaford (2012) presented a distance learning model of six interlocking circles that foster student spirituality and learning transformation. The six interlocking circles are (1) God’s Word and Spirit; (2) culture being respected and adjusted; (3) cohort community and rule; (4) students in their contexts; (5) personal practices; and 6) transformative learning within community. With these six interlocking circles that foster students' spiritual development held in mind, online learning is well situated to allow students to engage in all areas. Students who pack up and move to a campus may be artificially stripped from their life-contexts, personal practices, culture, and communities. On-campus spirituality develops in an artificial environment that may or may not help students in the long-term. However, online learning allows students to develop theologically and spiritually within the students’ real-life contexts, personal practices, native culture, and communities. Online learning’s ability to keep students immersed in real-life ministerial contexts and communities
may actually give it a strong advantage over residential theological education conducted entirely on campus.

Stephen Lowe (2010) provided another model. He applies Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model of personal ecology and global ecology to spiritual life. In this model, each person has a variety of internal interplaying factors which shape them (a personal ecology) while they are also positioned within an ever changing, interweaving global ecology of connections. With spiritual development taking place in the larger ecosystem, as S. Lowe (2010) suggested, Christian theological education immediately applies and intersects with real life. Some educators hold that online learning and other contextualized distance learning approaches, which enable students to remain in their ministry and socio-cultural contexts while studying, may actually better facilitate the theological student’s spiritual formation than on-campus education (Hannaford, 2012; S. Lowe, 2010; Naidoo, 2012).

**Historical Issues**

This section examines how online learning has emerged within the history of Christian theological education. For centuries, many people have had a desire for Christian theological education, and as a result, various theological schools and institutions have emerged using a variety of models (Kelsey, 1992). As the university research model began to form in the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church assured her followers through the Council of Trent (from 1545—1563) that every diocese would have a seminary (Kelsey, 1992). While other institutions may have offered graduate theological degrees, it was not until the early 19th century, with the
launching of Andover (in 1808) and Princeton (in 1812), that graduate theological institutions in the United States required an undergraduate degree prior to admission (Osborn, 2006).

Church-attending parishioners began seeing the value of ministers having “a broad general background of studies in contemporary arts and sciences enabling them to understand the life and times in which ministry is to be delivered,” (Jackson, 1997, p. 513). As a result, seminaries began requiring an undergraduate degree prior to admission and typically built upon a broader liberal arts education to provide graduate-level, professional Christian theological instruction (Osborn, 2006).

Graduate Christian theological education, historically, has fallen into three periods or eras. Osborn (2006) summarized these three eras:

The first period emphasized pious learning, and is called the pious or divinity period (i.e., Harvard in the late seventeenth century). During the divinity period, everything was "ordered toward divinity, toward reading and understanding sacred Scriptures" (Farley, 1983, p. 9). Three events set the stage for the close of the pious or divinity period: the separation of divinity into its own discipline, the creation of the post-college [Christian] theological education model, and the rise of denomination specific graduate theological schools. The second period, called the specialized period, began during the last half of the seventeenth century and continued into the eighteenth century. This period focused on specialized learning. Institutions began to drift away from having a single person (often the college president) teaching divinity to having a division chair and ultimately additional specialized faculty (Farley, 1983). The third period concentrated on professional education and began during the nineteenth century. This period was more
than an affirmation that graduate theological schools provided a professional education (similar to schools of medicine and law), but rather an education that focused on and prepared people for specific roles and functions in the local church. (p. 17)

During the third period, pedagogical approaches predominantly followed the same teacher-centered, lecture-based paradigm that pervaded theological education during Osborn’s previous two historical periods (Delamarter, 2004; Marsden, 1996; Osborn, 2006).

Online learning options emerge during this third historical period or era. Online learning confronts not only theological, philosophical, and pedagogical issues, but also a 500-year-old classroom-based teaching tradition. As it confronts this history and its tradition, online learning raises many of the questions and issues surveyed here and more. However, the main historical question asked is “can the new, technologically-enabled, educational means achieve the aims and purposes for which Christian theological education exists?” Repeatedly, research into online learning suggests that it does achieve Christian theological education’s goals (ATS, 2012; Heinemann, 2007; Hess, 2005a; S. Lowe, 2010).

In the historical ebb and flow of Christian theological education, online learning presents an opportunity for educational renewal (Osborn, 2006). The constantly-changing pedagogical approaches provide theological educators an opportunity to ask tough questions about teaching practices (Delamarter, 2004, 2006). Traditional pedagogical approaches that hold lecture as the primary teaching method portray the instructor as a “sage on the stage” who dispenses knowledge to an eager audience. However, since the 1980s, an increasing amount of pedagogical literature has encouraged a shift in how the instructor is viewed within contemporary history, viewing the instructor less as a “sage on the stage” and more as a “guide
on the side” (Barr & Tagg, 1999). While various educational philosophies can influence one’s historical perspective on the instructor’s role, online learning presents theological education with an opportunity to reexamine the contemporary pedagogical role of the instructor. The nature of online instruction via developed online curriculum blurs the line between “sage on the stage” and “guide on the side,” and it can help foster further discussion on how best to help students learn and grow in contemporary times. As the technological and pedagogical tectonic plates shift within Christian theological education, theological educators will hopefully engage in helpful discussions and find the delivery methods that most effectively prepare students for future ministry (Osborn, 2006).

**Social Issues**

Another major concern of online learning in Christian theological education is social presence. Christian theological education prioritizes face-to-face interaction in learning communities for a host of reasons described previously. Over the last twenty years, much Christian theological education literature has focused on the relational aspects of teacher-student interaction (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995; Delamarter, 2005b; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; M. Lowe, 2010; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Theological educators have been skeptical on if and to what degree a social relationship can be cultivated and supported online (Olglive, 2009). For many proponents of online learning in theological education, the development of social relationships (or social presence) is one of the major problems they must confront when implementing online learning programs (Naidoo, 2012; Roehrig, 2008).
Theological educators may have concerns about the nature of learning in an online community. However, theological educators cannot assume a true learning community exists anywhere—whether online or on-campus. Stephen Lowe (2010) identified this “unspoken assumption” among theological educators by summarizing their thoughts below:

In order for spiritual formation to be fostered in students, there must be a physical community in which the student interacts with other students, staff, and faculty. Since distance education does not offer this kind of community, how can it possibly further one of the central spiritual outcomes of seminary education? Further, if distance learning cannot help achieve this critical outcome of seminary education, why should it be considered as a desirable adjunct to the seminary experience? Since seminary education includes a formational component and formation requires a campus community, then isn’t this outcome antithetical to education at a distance? (p.5).

Questions like these assume that learning communities only have trouble existing in online learning. However, Senior and Weber (1994) stated that the idealistic rhetoric for on-campus learning communities does not always live up to its claim when they state, “‘Being there’ -- in residence with the community [of a traditional residential program] -- is seen by some as a *sine qua non* of good education. But people involved in theological schools today know that the reality is often much different than the rhetoric” (p. 27). Paris (2000) goes beyond questioning the rhetoric and argued that the assumption about the superiority of face-to-face classroom learning is an assumption accepted on faith rather than a proposition supported by research.

However, some theological educators (Cormode, 1999) argue that the seminary culture itself teaches something essential for ministerial formation. These proponents seem to idealize
the old university model where a pure learning community existed in isolation from the rest of the world and allowed students to immerse themselves in their education (Marsden, 1996). Some theological educators may still idealize this isolated culture model today (House, 2005). They view seminary as a vital, isolated learning community that happens for a set period of years and equips ministers to, upon graduation, go out into the world of ministry to serve God and others.

While most educators would agree that culture does teach something, one cannot assume an isolated learning community is the ideal, that a cloistered community of learning best prepares ministers to engage the world (or that such an idealistic culture even exists in Christian theological education). Faculty and students may worship and fellowship together on-campus. A select few may also go to church together outside of class. Yet the ideal of an isolated, pure community of learning that cloisters ministers until graduation is losing relevance and popularity within contemporary Christian theological education (Aleshire, 2006; Marsden, 1996). Most Protestant seminary students have families, careers, and congregations that are the foci of their lives more than the theological institution (Patterson, 1996; Raybon, 2012; Reissner, 1999). Even the brick and mortar institutions of public and private higher education have experienced a similar sense of loss of the ideal academic community, although they appear to have adjusted to the contemporary milieu faster than Christian theological education (Lucas, 2006).

In Christian theological education (and possibly all higher education), it may be best to view learning communities as though existing on a continuum. Some learning communities will be real, vibrant, active, and come close to the ideals of a pure, isolated learning environment.
Others will fall short of that ideal. Either type can show up in Christian theological education. Whether on-campus or online, a community of learning cannot simply be assumed in Christian theological education, no matter the setting. In any and every case, it takes work to build a genuine and vibrant learning community (M. Lowe, 2010).

Discussions related to learning communities -- whether online or not -- raise the question, “What is the nature of an authentic learning community?” First, an authentic learning community in Christian theological education will have shared pursuits. Banks (1994) identified a Christian community as “a group of people who seek to develop a Christianly informed common life, through regular verbal and nonverbal ‘communication,’ leading to the development of real ‘communion with one another and God’” (p. 19). In Christian theological education, these shared pursuits will lead to an exhibited commonality within a learning community. Second, an authentic learning community in Christian theological education will have shared patterns. Notice above that Banks (1994) mentioned a shared pattern of living. Kraus (1979), a Mennonite Bible scholar, defined an authentic community as “a group of people who have formed a pattern of interdependent and reciprocal relationships which aim at enhancing the personal quality of the group itself” (p. 121). The shared pattern of life is vital to defining an authentic community. Third, an authentic learning community in Christian theological education will have shared profits. As administrators, educators, and students invest time, money, resources, and engage in the theological enterprise, they will rejoice in the shared educational profits that they receive from such investments.

Proponents of Christian online theological education have been very adamant about fostering authentic communities of learning. They have identified various factors that
encourage a community of learning to develop. First, a community of learning happens when faculty are intentional in creating and leading communities of learning. Faculty intentionality is the primary and most important factor, as the faculty significantly influences the online learning process (Baker, 2010). Even though there is a stereotype that online learning communities cannot foster the type of interaction needed, if instructors are intentional about creating connections with their students, then an authentic learning community can exist online (Baker, 2010; S. Lowe, 2010). Second, a community of learning happens when students perceive a meaningful purpose in the course. In Christian theological education, students already come with high motivation (Rovai, 2008). The threshold for the interaction needed to build a true learning community upon that student perception is minimal. However, the more “immediacy” the instructor can create between teacher and student, the better (Baker, 2010). Third, a community of learning happens when students are not isolated from their life-context, but instead can experience their life-context and education as part of larger learning ecosystem (S. Lowe, 2010). The contemporary student needs to be able to incorporate their educational experience into their personal, communal, and global ecologies. In turn, the ecosystem of learning may actually work to achieve the aims and purposes of Christian theological education more effectively.

While online learning can foster authentic communities of learning, we must acknowledge that differences do exist in their composition and may come through the interplay
of various social factors. Eastmond (1995) summarized the variety of social influences interfacing in the distance student’s life:

Being active in distance learning is much more of a social enterprise than it would appear. First, many of these students told me how they negotiated with their spouses, families, and friends for support in working on a distance degree. Second, these students have contact with their advisor and the professor teaching the course -- more or less depending on the individual -- in working through the assignments for the course. Third, fellow workers, friends, and extended family members are often involved with these students as they discuss course concepts and seek application of them in their lives. Fourth, several students related how important it was to them to be able to obtain feedback from other students about course assignments and activities -- a new dimension added to their distance education through the implementation of computer conferencing (p. 106).

By virtue of being at a distance, online learners have to rely on technologically mediated means to communicate with instructors and classmates. However, that does not mean that it is any less real or viable as a learning community. Students in general crave social interactivity (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Fink, 2002). On-campus social interaction may happen more easily when students are physically in the same location. The virtue of being physically present may also mask the lack of real social interaction because of student’s perception (Rovai, 2002). Online social interaction may require using more technology, require more time, and may not happen as easily as in-person interaction. However, such technologically mediated interaction is vital to the process (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Heinemann (2005a) demonstrated that when
professors take the initiative and interact with their online students via quick email responses to questions, active participation in discussion boards, timely and descriptive feedback on assignments, etc., the students are satisfied with the quality of online learning they receive. Even though it is a technologically mediated community, it can be just as satisfying (maybe even more so) to students when faculty provides ample cognitive, teaching, and social presence in an online course (Bagherian & Thorngate, 2000; Meyer, 2002; Heinemann, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

**Institutional Issues**

Institutional factors and concerns are issues in Christian online theological education. Institutions always have to adapt to the changing culture around them. Working with a changing culture is a common practice in higher education, and Christian theological educational institutions are not immune to the vast cultural changes. Aleshire (2006) implored theological institutions to become more aware of their cultural contexts. Many denominations and churches have gone from (a) not having a theologically trained minister to (b) viewing theological training as a prerequisite for ministry to (c) a modern-day mix of theological training being desired by most traditional denominations and churches but growing less important in many contemporary or emerging ministry contexts (Aleshire, 2006; Hess, 2005a; Raybon, 2012). Within the theological student population base, fewer students are able to quit their jobs, relocate their live and families, and find time to attend traditional seminaries or divinity schools (Hess, 2005a; Raybon, 2012). Students are increasingly mobile and transient, with those who do relocate to the physical location of a theological school participating as commuters (Hess,
Within the larger church culture, denominational membership is declining, which in turn means there may be fewer traditional ministerial jobs available (Aleshire, 2006). In the cultural milieu, many theological organizations focus on maintaining the classical status quo instead of organizing and strategically planning to adapt to a changing landscape (Meyer, 2002).

Institutional change is never easy (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Kotter, 1996). Several reasons factor into why theological institutions are not implementing more distance or online learning programs. Roehrig (2008) gave three of them: (1) lack of physical presence (based on social and pedagogical assumptions about it being necessary); (2) lack of research, development, and finances; and (3) lack of understanding about personal development in online environments. His second reason primarily identifies institutional issues. Bates’ (2000) work went further, outlining unique challenges to institutions implementing and using any technology. He explored the following seven unique challenges that affect theological institutions:

1. High costs typically associated with technology;
2. The need to reexamine teaching and learning;
3. The need to transition to more post-industrial forms of organizational structure;
4. The need to update faculty reward and tenure structure to reflect the value of using technology;
5. Understanding and complying with copyright law;
6. Funding; and
7. A historical commitment to the classical paradigm.

Many theological institutions follow a classical pedagogical paradigm, hold to a strict industrial organizational model, and have little budget room to invest in major technological and
pedagogical initiatives. As a result, the interplay of Bates’ (2000) seven unique challenges drives theological institutions to create a high organizational threshold, which in turn becomes a barrier keeping theological schools from expanding and improving distance and online learning programs.

Theological institutions no doubt have their own concerns with online learning. However, work by Osborn (2006) can help theological schools learn what issues arise when implementing technological change and help them differentiate between negative preconceptions and reality. Osborn did a case study of a moderately sized theological seminary and identified (a) what institutional factors went away with time and (b) which factors persisted after program implementation. Osborn found that financial concerns, accreditation concerns, concerns about the quality of teaching and learning, and fears and resistance to using technology went away with time. However, three factors persisted within the institution: (1) faculty concerns (mainly the time and resources for developing online courses and worries over how much time these courses would require of them in the future), (2) the need for more teacher and student support structures, and (3) the need for better communication with support staff.

When it comes to implementing technology (especially teaching through online means), theological institutions may move through stages. Delamarter (2004) identified five stages that schools (and the faculty within them) may progress through when adopting technology. In Stage 1, theological faculty merely supercharge their current classical pedagogical paradigm with technology. For example, they begin using PowerPoint to highlight lectures or increase online access to library resources. At Stage 2, Delamarter (2004) described three different
stages. In Stage 2A, institutions (and their faculty) try to replicate the classroom learning experience by using technology. In Stage 2B, institutions (and their faculty) begin to realize that technology cannot fully reproduce the classroom, and they start to examine the best pedagogical methods to deliver education through technologically mediated means. In Stage 2C, institutions (and their faculty) move from just offering a few pedagogically sound distance or online learning courses to offering their entire curriculum through distance or online learning means. In Stage 3, which is the highest level, technology is fully integrated into the life, mission, and teaching of the institution. Technologically mediated educational means become a vital part of institutional life. Delamarter claimed that few theological institutions have achieved a Stage 3 approach in their institutions.

Theological institutions need to strategically plan for how to enhance their faculty’s teaching and their students’ learning with technology. Delamarter (2006) gave theological institutions eight questions to help prepare for technological change (particularly aimed at faculty, as they are the main line to mainstreaming technology into pedagogy):

1. What prevents us from thinking in new ways about technology for [Christian] theological education?

2. What are our current practices that foster strategic thinking about technology?

3. Are there institutional shortcuts to developing critical mass of understanding expertise?

4. What puts the strategic in “strategic planning” (meaning what makes these moves strategic)?

5. What are the key questions about models of faculty involvement?
6. What are the key questions about models of IT support?
7. What are the key questions about the delivery system models?
8. What are the key questions about models of student involvement?

A strategic plan that addresses these categories of concern will help theological institutions prepare for implementing technology. Even though implementing technology may be a strategic institutional move, various technological issues also arise concerning technology in Christian online theological education.

**Technological Issues**

Technology holds a lot of promise for Christian theological education. For example, in the contemporary technological landscape, online learning provides theological institutions the ability to extend their reach. Students who otherwise would not or could not attend on-campus are able to learn via online learning. Online learning creates opportunity for more enhanced blended on-campus learning options. Online learning, which allows for anywhere, anytime access, empowers professors to try different pedagogical approaches and aim at higher-order thinking. Online learning allows professors to connect beyond the classroom and foster even deeper connections. However, for institutions that are wired and rooted in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20 New International Version), technologically aided instruction has been viewed with trepidation and created “no small amount of anxiety among theological educators, particularly when it comes to technology for distance applications,” (Delamarter, 2005a, p. 131).
Faculty express concerns regarding teaching with technology. Since the inception of online learning possibilities, faculty have had to adapt to a lot of technological change, and even more adaptation is needed. Delamarter (2005a) identified five areas where theological educators have had to gain technological skills in the last two decades: (1) personal computing (2) functioning in a connected world, (3) information literacy for research and ministry, (4) using technology to compliment face-to-face instruction, and (5) using technology for asynchronous instruction. Faculty are the ones who must make use of educational technology for it to make a broader, institutional impact. Delamarter (2006) suggested seven questions that institutional leaders should think through when implementing technology.

1. To what extent will it require faculty members to use new equipment or engage in new digital processes?
2. To what extent will it require faculty members to be constructing digital materials?
3. To what extent will it require faculty members to administer and/or present digital materials?
4. To what extent will it require faculty members to understand and adopt new pedagogical strategies?
5. How will all of this [teaching with technology] affect the current system of incentives, compensation, and load?
6. If these practices are to become requirements of the job, will it affect hiring, promotion, and tenure considerations?
7. How will technology requirements ultimately change the nature of what it means to be a theological faculty member?
**Various technical concerns.** Theological institutions have various concerns they must think through concerning technology. Will the technology be accessible to students and all who use it (Smith & Snodderly, 2010)? Students may be digital natives, but that does not mean that they are fluent with contemporary technology (Bartlett & Miller, 2011): merely having access does not assure proficiency (Resnick, 2002). Additionally, fluency in one area of technology does not necessarily mean fluency in all technological areas. Students may be able to text on mobile device, email on a computer, and surf the web on their laptop, but that does not necessarily mean they know how to write a blog, appropriately share on a forum/discussion board, or perform other technological tasks.

In addition to thinking about how well students can use certain educational technology, institutions have to consider other questions related to technology. Questions arise, such as will appropriate technical support systems be in place (ATS, 2012b)? Will appropriate student support structures be there to help (ATS, 2012b)? Will there be an appropriate financial base to provide the technological services? Will the institution’s technological infrastructure be adequate to provide the service?

Even though theological institutions may have some hesitation about implementing technology or creating technological change, research shows that technological concerns disappear with time (Osborn, 2006). It appears that technology (and potential implementations of it) is a “perceived evil” when first used. Responses and adoption rates will vary, as not everyone is an early adopter (Rogers, 1995). However, in time, faculty, administrators, and students alike will adapt. They will become more comfortable and proficient using technology in both teaching and learning (Delamarter, 2005a; Osborn, 2006).
Pedagogical Issues

For Christian theological education, online learning presents a minefield of pedagogical issues. When Christian theological educational institutions first begin exploring online learning, their first impression is that the issues will be technological. However, the irony of online learning in Christian theological education is that the main issue is actually pedagogical (Delamarter, 2005a). As Mary Hess (2005b) stated, digital technologies “alert us to the contradictions that can exist between our Christian convictions and our pedagogies” (p.88). As theological educators begin to employ technology, they recognize “the effective use of technology in teaching—whether to enhance conventional classroom instruction or through more integrated uses – is not simply a matter of translating conventional classroom strategies into an online format. Rather, it requires confronting foundational questions about the content, methods, and desired outcomes of the teaching/learning experience,” (Blier, 2008, p.25).

Unfortunately, though, Blier (2008) claimed that most research inadvertently reinforces poor pedagogical perspectives. Most of the pedagogical literature in Christian theological education focuses on how to transmit information and content, which reinforces novice’s suspicions that online learning is merely one-dimensional. When online learning is mixed with poor pedagogical practices, it perpetuates bad teaching and ineffective learning, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for the critics of online learning.

**Bad teaching and good teaching-regardless of the medium.** Theological educators should realize that bad teaching is bad teaching, regardless of the means. There is an unwritten assumption that the presence of teacher and students together in one location somehow equals good pedagogy (Delamarter, 2005a; House, 2005). However, physical presence in the
same location in no way guarantees good pedagogy. Face-to-face instruction can be just as lifeless and disconnected as any other means of instruction; ineffective teaching is just as ineffective online as it is face-to-face. Perceived weaknesses in online education are just as prevalent in classroom teaching (Hess, 2005b; Patterson, 1996). Technology cannot inherently save poor pedagogy either. Administrators may be eager to implement technology to expand the teaching reach of their institutions, but “their goal is to use the technology to transmit a tired and stale pedagogy over fiber optic cable—as if the fiber optic cable will somehow transform the pedagogy,” (McIntyre in Palloff, 2007, p. 231).

While bad teaching is bad teaching, regardless of the means, it also holds that good teaching remains also good teaching, regardless of the means. Whether online or face-to-face, instructors who are actively engaging, instructing, and interacting with their students remain the primary factor of good teaching (Baker, 2010; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Fink, 2002). The means through which such instructional interaction happens is not as important as whether it happens. It is vital that faculty maintain a cognitive presence (meaning that there is enough instructor-provided communication to enable learning), teaching presence (which means providing structure, sequence, and facilitating active learning), and social presence within any course regardless of delivery method (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Catron (2012) discovered that, “Teaching presence is found to exhibit not only the highest mean ratings by students, but also the strongest, most substantive relationship to student satisfaction” (p. v).

**Online learning challenges classical pedagogical approaches.** Christian online theological education may raise suspicions for theological educators who have a classical
pedagogical approach. They typically cannot see how online learning can achieve the goals of Christian theological education. Graham (2002) summarized the goals of Christian theological education as including theological learning, practical preparation for ministry, and spiritual and personal formation. In the context of online learning, theological educators take issue with the affective dimension—the personal, spiritual, and social aspects of human existence. They see how online or technologically enabled methods can teach knowledge, but they do not see how such means can create a certain kind of character or person (Graham, 2002). Meanwhile, on campus, theological educators have perpetuated a pedagogy inherited from the Reformation and assumed that it is the way things are and should be done (Marsden, 1996). In general, Christian theological education has held onto this classical pedagogical paradigm and not asked the tough pedagogical questions. They have not examined if classical approaches are the best way to achieve Christian theological education’s goals. Whether on-campus or online, classical content and classical educational aims do not require classical pedagogical means (Delamarter, 2004; Graham, 2002; Osborn, 2006).

**Student-centered learning.** For many theological educators, online learning requires a drastic shift in pedagogical thinking and practice. Many theological educators rely on a traditional teacher-centered pedagogical paradigm, whereas online learning may require a student-centered pedagogical approach (or at least a blend the two approaches). Considering many theological educators hold on to their teacher-centered pedagogy, moving from a teacher-centered to a student-centered pedagogical approach can be difficult (Aleshire, 2006; Heinemann, 2005b). As can be seen in Table 4 below, the pedagogical shift requires changing attitudes in various educational areas (Allen, 2004; Freed & Huba, 2000; Weimer, 2013).
Table 4. Teacher-centered vs. Student-centered Pedagogy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational area</th>
<th>Teacher-centered</th>
<th>Student-centered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balance of power</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher and student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of content</td>
<td>Gain and grasp knowledge</td>
<td>Develop and experience learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the teacher</td>
<td>Sage on stage</td>
<td>Guide on the side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical approach</td>
<td>Delivers information</td>
<td>Engages students in their learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective teaching</td>
<td>Present information well and those who can learn</td>
<td>Engage students and help them learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for learning</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Teacher and student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How students learn</td>
<td>Listening, reading, examination</td>
<td>Active learning strategies that involve students, help them construct knowledge, and involves social and cognitive interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of assessment</td>
<td>Test knowledge acquisition</td>
<td>Help students master learning objectives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the pedagogical history of Christian theological education, teachers have maintained power, functioned as a “sage on a stage” who delivers information, required students to passively listen and read, and used assessments purely to test knowledge acquisition (Marsden, 1996; Osborn, 2006). Shifting to a student-centered pedagogy is drastically different, balancing power between teacher and student, requiring teachers to act more as guides and facilitators, and necessitates student active engagement and involvement, and views assessment as more formative -- helping students master learning objectives. Online learning disrupts the teacher-centered paradigm and typically requires more student-centered pedagogical approaches (or some mix between them) (Raybon, 2012). As a variety of cultural, institutional, financial and educational factors spark continued growth and increase the need for online learning in Christian theological education, theological educators may be forced to adopt student-centered pedagogical approaches. At the very least, they may need to discover a balance in pedagogical
approaches that fits their educational philosophies (Aleshire, 2006; Bates, 2000; Blier, 2008; Delamarter, 2005a; Heinemann, 2007; Hess, 2005; Osborn, 2006; Raybon, 2012).

**Online learning encourages pedagogical renewal in Christian theological education.**

Discussions about online learning reveal a deeper, broader need for pedagogical renewal in Christian theological education. There is a need to move beyond assumptions and educational philosophies toward open conversation about pedagogical approaches in Christian theological education. All educators have assumptions undergirding their educational philosophies. However, there has not been much widespread, open, critical, and honest conversation concerning pedagogy in Christian theological education (Fuller, 2009). As discussed above, online learning naturally encourages a shift in pedagogical practice. Instructors typically transition from the locus of classroom power and authority to a facilitator of a curriculum who guides students through their learning. As online learning disrupts or challenges traditional pedagogical practice in Christian theological education, theological educators have an opportunity to experience pedagogical renewal. Theological education’s pedagogical pendulum may not shift completely toward students-centered learning. However, conversations about contemporary and online pedagogy might produce a healthy mix of teacher and student centered learning which could spark wider pedagogical renewal throughout Christian theological education (Delamarter, 2006).

**Improving course design.** While many theological educators hold a traditional classroom pedagogy and engage in little pedagogical conversation, it is not surprising that there is a void in the literature concerning online course design for Christian online theological education. While higher education has invested more than ten years examining online course
design through various publications and organizational efforts (an effort which is examined more thoroughly in the next section of this chapter), few resources exist that discuss online course design within Christian online theological education (Ko, 2005; Moore; 2011). In the few pieces focused on the topic in Christian educational literature, most anecdotally discuss online course design, mentioning case studies or providing lessons learned in building and teaching an online course (Ascough, 2002; Cannell, 1999; Roehrig, 2008). Only Delamarter (2006) discussed online course design from a “big picture perspective.” He described the following six different approaches that theological educators take when designing an online course:

1. The online course, designed as an imitation of a face-to-face course.
2. The online course, designed as an electronically mediated correspondence course.
3. The online course, designed with the focus on student-centered, constructivist learning processes.
4. The stand-alone hybrid course (in all its various forms).
5. The hybrid course embedded diachronically in a program.
6. The hybrid course embedded diachronically and synchronically in a cohort-based hybrid approach.

These six approaches summarize how theological educators have viewed designing online coursework. Delamarter’s work has been the only major step in this direction. However, theological educators need better instructional models to enable them to implement online pedagogy well. Christian theological education will, in time, likely mirror higher education’s shift in the late 1990s: from “no significant difference” to a greater focus on how best to design courses and programs, facilitate learning, conduct assessment and achieve learning outcomes.
(Raybon, 2012; Russell, 1999). As the discussions shift from debating online learning to how best to implement it, there will be a need for standards and benchmarks of quality for online theological education.

**Evaluating Quality in Distance Education**

Discussing quality in online education raises several significant questions. What is quality in online learning? How do you assess and evaluate it? Who are the interested entities? Is quality in online learning any different than quality in traditional, face-to-face education? What standards of quality exist that are related to online learning in higher education? This section addresses these questions.

**What is Quality in Online Learning?**

Defining quality in online learning is a difficult task. As Sherry (2003) stated, “translating ideals of academic excellence into applicable terms for providers and users of distance education is not an easy task...[however] in this new century, with distance education expanding worldwide, the urgency of quality assurance is apparent” (p 435). Quality is both difficult to define and urgently needed. Every interested entity in higher education (e.g., accreditation agencies, educational institutions, administrators, faculty, students) needs a better understanding of what factors determine quality in online learning (Meyer, 2002).
How does one define “quality” in online learning? “The lack of a consistent, agreed-on definition for what quality is” can be very problematic (Meyer, 2002, p. 22). Oblinger (1998) asked a series of questions to illustrate how difficult quality can be to assess:

Is quality assessed on faculty expertise or volumes in the library? Are some criteria more important than others? Further, how much weight should be placed on the traditional input variables i.e., faculty degree or rank, library volumes, number and variety of degree programs, Carnegie classification). Which process variables should we use, those dealing with instructional models, attention to student learning styles and other important differences, the use made of technology, faculty/student ratios or class size, contact hours, or opportunities to be taught by full professors? And what outcome variables indicate quality – the final GPA, student satisfaction, alumni giving, or some assessment of what has been learned (if possible)? (In Meyer, 2002, p. 23)

Different educators (institutions or different groupings of educators) would likely answer these questions in different ways. One instructor, institution, or group might highlight faculty rank or publications to emphasize academic prestige (Jaschik, 2007; O’Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011), another might focus on student-faculty ratio to emphasize a relational learning environment (Hopkins, 2013; Wellesley College, n.d.), while yet another boasts of their students’ achievements after graduation to emphasize end-results (Harvard University, n.d.; Stanford University, n.d.). Thus, quality becomes an elusive, difficult concept to define constructively.

Quality in online learning may not be definable. Nunan and Calvert (1992) claimed that “Quality is a conditional reality based on context, place, and power” and that investigating the quality of distance education is “a complex undertaking which is located in an inherited context
of time, place and power (p. 7).” From this perspective, quality becomes a construct relative to whoever is defining it. One group may provide one definition of quality; another group may give a different definition. Each definition is relative to the unique perspectives and interpretations of the individual or group making the definition (e.g., faculty, administrators, oversight boards, employers, and state legislatures, local governing bodies, accrediting associations). Quality, then, is a construct that lies in the eye(s) of the beholder(s) who define it (Novak, 2002). As a result of being constructed by the observer, any definition of quality is only as good as the individual or community that defines it. The effectiveness of any definition of quality depends on how well an individual or group can foster agreement around and/or represent a community’s common goals and standards (Parker, 2008).

Who is Interested in Defining Quality?

Since definitions and standards of quality in online learning are relative to the people who define them, who, then, are the interested parties in quality? Quality in online learning is a concern of educational administrators, faculty, the federal government, state governments, and researchers (Chaney, 2006; Meyer, 2002). Sherry (2003) recognized that various global initiatives, national consortia, national initiatives, governmental agencies and studies, educational businesses, enterprises, or vendors, and specifically focused projects or groups—like In International Higher Education Policy (IHEP), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), or even faculty senates—have a stake in quality online learning.

While various interested parties are interested in defining quality in online learning, their definitions, benchmarks, or standards of quality will likely have points where they agree
and disagree with one another. To see how divergent agreement/disagreement can be, Novak (2002) compared standards of quality in online education from both the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and the “Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001). “ Novak (2002) summarized five primary areas where they agreed:

1. Appropriate preparation and support for online students,
2. Adequate technology requirements and support,
3. Making pedagogical requirements for online courses clear,
4. Need for faculty support to develop and deliver online learning, and
5. Clarity in faculty contractual issues regarding compensation and intellectual property.

Novak (2002) also identified the following six points where they disagreed:

1. Learning styles and whether they factor into online courses,
2. Assessment strategies,
3. Whether or not collaborative or group work should be included...and if so, how much,
4. The issue of time—how much work to assign, how much is enough, how quickly feedback should be given, etc.,
5. Should the online learning environment emulate the traditional classroom environment? and
6. Faculty involvement and roles in the instructional design of the course.
Novak’s (2002) work illustrated that various individuals, institutions, or organizations can agree on certain points concerning standards of quality. However, no two individuals, institutions, or groups are likely to agree on what the ideal classroom -- online or otherwise -- should look like. Any particular set of standards of quality will be only as effective or widely accepted as their embodiment of the ideals of the group who defined them.

**How is Quality Measured?**

Quality can be assessed through different means and by looking at a variety of factors. Sherry (2003) provided a comprehensive view of different ways to measure quality. Each of Sherry’s approaches is examined in more detail below. First, quality is measured through data-gathering schemes. For the data-gathering approach, she expanded on Kirkpatrick’s (1994) work. Kirkpatrick (1994) identified four different levels of data to gather and evaluate. Level 1 investigates learners’ attitudes about their learning or the learning environment by administering surveys before, during, and after their learning experience. Level 2 assesses students' knowledge transfer (i.e., what they learned) by using skill or knowledge based tests. Level 3 examines the transfer of learned behaviors. Evaluators use surveys to examine the application of learning, conduct on-site observations, hold control group testing sessions, or evaluate certification processes at the end of programs. Level 4 strives to measure long-term organizational impact, which may entail following up with employers to determine how former students perform in their jobs and if they are adequately prepared for their tasks.

Kirkpatrick (1994) presented a holistic approach to data gathering which can give a composite picture of quality. Sherry seemed aware of the danger that data gathering
approaches encounter -- a tendency of focusing too narrowly on one issue or data gathering method and not implement a balanced, multi-faceted approach. For example, administrators may choose to focus on Level 4 in an attempt to highlight career outcomes. They might exclusively focus on one factor and overlook the other levels of data that might help explain total program quality. Therefore, Kirkpatrick’s (1994) presentation of data gathering schemes offered a balanced, four level approach to demonstrating quality.

While data-gathering schemes are widely popular for assessing quality in online learning, other approaches exist. The second approach to measuring quality mentioned by Sherry (2003) is end-of-course evaluations. End of course evaluations focus specifically on end-of-course self-reports and are typically unified into a broader meta-analysis. They may also go through one or all four levels mentioned above. However, end-of-course self-reports may miss student attitudes, motivation, and miss other pedagogical factors involved in the course.

A third approach to measuring quality in online learning is to examine communication patterns. Sherry (2003) surveyed five different ways that communication patterns can be evaluated: (1) measuring the types of interactions, (2) human observational reporting, (3) computer-based analyses, (4) self-reporting, and (5) comprehensive evaluations that combine various communication elements. Examining communication patterns in a course may more accurately reveal what truly factors into learning within the course. However, examining the communication patterns within an online course can be very intensive and time consuming.

The fourth approach to measuring quality in online learning requires examining factors related to interacting with content (Sherry, 2003). In particular, Sherry highlights a need to examine online courses in light of Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles of Good
Practice and the corresponding online learning application of the same principles in Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996) Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever. Chickering and Gamson’s seven principles (and Chickering and Ehrmann’s application of them to online learning) are classic pedagogy. However, assessing these principles often requires subjective reflection on open-ended questions created from their seven principles. Considering that the other ways to measure quality mentioned by Sherry (2003) have a bias toward data, subjective evaluation based on Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) work may provide a healthy balance in evaluating quality in online learning.

Is Quality in Online Learning Different than Quality in Traditional Classroom Education?

As has been discussed above, during the short history of online learning, researchers have debated whether there is a difference between online and traditional classroom education. Yet the contemporary consensus is that quality education is quality education regardless of the delivery method. The means may differ and the specific factors that determine quality may be different, but good teaching is still good teaching in any environment (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

In the beginning, discussions on quality related to how online learning compared to its face-to-face counterpart. Studies comparing the two delivery methods where conducted throughout most of online learning’s first decade (Russell, 1999). By 1999, a consensus began to emerge that there was “no significant difference” between the two delivery methods (Russell, 1999). From 1999 to 2009, many other meta-analytic studies demonstrated that few differences existed between online and traditional education outcomes (Bata-Jones & Avery,
2004; Smith, Smith, & Boone, 2000; Tallent-Runnell et al., 2006). In the 2000s, some studies emerged revealing that online learning was helping students acquire greater content knowledge than their counterparts in traditional courses (R. Maki, W. Maki, Patterson, & Whittaker, 2000).

Two thousand and nine may have been a watershed year for comparative studies between educational delivery methods. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) conducted a meta-analysis of “rigorous” studies that used experimental, controlled, or quasi-experimental designs (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). The DOE study discovered that students in online courses performed modestly better than those in face-to-face courses do. Wisely, however, they did not attribute the cause solely to the medium itself. Instead, they suggested that a variety of factors needed to be considered (e.g., instructional design quality, resource investment, student time on task).

The DOE report (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009) also spoke positively about blended learning options (because the effect size was greater for blended than online or traditional delivery). However, elsewhere in the report, they carefully noted that the larger effect size for blended learning came from comparing blended and online in relation to face-to-face instruction. It did not come from purely blended learning. When the DOE researchers examined the subset of studies that directly compared blended and online learning delivery methods, they found few significant differences between online and blended learning. Thus, their research suggests that even though blended and online together rate significantly better than face-to-face courses, there is little empirical “basis for choosing online versus blended instructional conditions,” (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009, p.40).
In the context of the vast history of education, online learning—and other delivery means that incorporate it—is still in its infancy. Moreover, the rate of technological change the world is experiencing is unprecedented in human history, which means the delivery methods themselves can change faster than online learning can mature with them (Ascough, 2002). Even though the online learning literature is still relatively young, the research has grown rapidly nevertheless. This growing body of work suggests that online learning and traditional delivery methods are comparable, and that online and blended learning options may even be more effective (Catron, 2012).

**What Significant Standards of Quality Exist for Online Learning?**

As questions of equality move to the periphery of the online versus face-to-face learning debate, questions concerning standards of quality soon arise. The online learning quality discussion and research related to it has begun to focus on establishing standards of quality in the newly accepted educational medium. Examining “existing guidelines and initiatives offer structure for investigators who seek answers to the question of how quality-based distance learning might look,” (Sherry, 2003, p. 31).

In this section, we will examine six significant sets of standards of quality for online learning. These six sets of standards were selected because they appeared and were cited most frequently in the relevant online learning literature. The six sets of standards that we will examine are:

1. Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,”
2. The Institute of Higher Education Policy’s report *Quality on the Line* (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000),


4. The University of Maryland University College’s *Best Online Instructional Practices* (Keeton, 2004),

5. The Online Learning Consortium’s (Moore, 2011) *Quality Framework and the Five Pillars*, and


**“Good Practice”**

The first step toward establishing standards of quality in online learning was applying an already widely accepted pedagogical standard. If higher educational pedagogy had an equivalent to the Bible’s Ten Commandments, it might be Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson’s (1987) “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.” In this article, Chickering and Gamson distilled decades of educational research on undergraduate teaching and learning into seven principles:

1. Good practice encourages contacts between students and faculty;

2. Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;

3. Good practice uses active learning techniques;

4. Good practice gives prompt feedback;
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task;  
6. Good practice communicates high expectations; and  
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

As online learning emerged, and educators began looking for standards, Arthur Chickering and Stephen Ehrmann decided to create an article derived from their original research. Chickering and Ehrmann published “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever” in 1996. The article applied the original seven principles to computer-mediated learning and saw technology as a tool for achieving these same seven practices.

Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996) article served as the first substantial work related to how online learning can be done well. It adequately applies the principles of Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) work to an online learning context. Chickering and Ehrmann’s research served its purpose by giving teachers guiding principles instead of trying to give a list of comprehensive standards of quality. Chickering and Ehrmann -- building upon Chickering and Gamson (1987) -- produced widely accepted principles of quality teaching. Sherry (2003) identified Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996) work as the catalyst for the larger national discussion on quality in online learning. Particular faculty and institutions may or may not be a part of that larger discussion, but Sherry (2003) marked Chickering and Ehrmann’s (1996) work as the starting point for the growing national discussion for standards of quality in online higher education. Chickering and Ehrmann did not present measurable benchmarks or standards per se, but within college teaching and online learning literature, any discussion on quality teaching begins with Chickering and Gamson (and/or Chickering and Ehrmann).
IHEP’s *Quality on the Line*

The Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) took another major step toward standards of quality in online learning. In 2000, IHEP published *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-based Distance Education* (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000). With *Quality on the Line*, IHEP made the most comprehensive statement about online quality standards that had been published till that time – and it remains one of the most comprehensive even today (Catron, 2012; Novak, 2002; Sherry, 2003). The National Education Association (NEA) and Blackboard, Inc. jointly commissioned the IHEP report. In *Quality on the Line*, they aimed to:

1. Attempt to validate those benchmarks that have been published by various entities;
2. Ascertain the degree to which the benchmarks are actually incorporated in the policies, procedures, and practices of colleges and universities that are distance education leaders; and
3. Determine how important the benchmarks are to the institutions’ faculty, administrators, and students (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000).

*Quality on the Line* sought to identify various quality standards (or benchmarks) in order to guide online learning. The case study followed a three-phase process. First, they conducted a comprehensive literature review to determine what quality standards (or benchmarks) had been recommended by policy groups, educational organizations, and several leading experts in higher education. The literature review produced 45 benchmarks. In the second phase, researchers identified institutions that had substantive distance education experience. To qualify for this phase, the institutions had to: (1) have substantial distance education experience; (2) be recognized as leaders in distance education; (3) be regionally accredited; and
(4) offer more than one degree through online learning. From the selection criteria, only six institutions out of 147 examined made the cut. The six selected institutions consisted of a community college, an online institution, and comprehensive research universities.

In the third phase, representatives from IHEP surveyed and interviewed faculty, students, and administrators at each of the selected institutions. They assessed the degree to which each selected institution actually practiced the quality standards (or benchmarks) identified earlier. This step determined if a quality standard was actually necessary or not to achieve quality. After the three-phase process concluded, the list of 45 benchmarks identified from the literature review had been reduced to 24 (with the other 21 being culled in phase three of the study). Thus, the IHEP report *Quality on the Line* established 24 benchmarks (or quality standards) for online learning grouped into the following seven categories: Institutional Support, Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, Student Support, Faculty Support, and Evaluation and Assessment.

In the Institutional Support category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) identified the following quality standards (or benchmarks) as essential: (1) a documented technology plan, (2) a reliable technology delivery system, and (3) a centralized system that provides support. They eliminated the following quality standards: (a) faculty incentives for innovative development and (b) institutional reward for effective teaching. The main reason for the exclusions was that quality distance education was happening at institutions without faculty incentives or rewards.

In the Course Development category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000), three quality standards (or benchmarks) were identified as essential: (1) guidelines that set minimum
standards for course development, (2) a periodic review of instructional materials, (3) and student engagement in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The following five quality standards were eliminated in Phase 3 of the study, due to lack of wide application within recognized leading online programs:

1. During course development the various learning styles of students are considered;
2. Assessment instruments are used to ascertain the specific learning styles of students, which then determine the type of course delivery;
3. Courses are designed with a consistent structure, easily discernible to students of varying learning styles;
4. Course design is managed by teams comprised of faculty content experts, instructional designers, technical experts, and evaluation personnel; and
5. Distance learning course development must be approved through a broad peer review process.

In the Teaching/Learning category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) described the following quality standards (or benchmarks) as essential: (1) student interaction with faculty and other students, (2) timely feedback to student assignments and questions, and (3) student instruction in the proper methods of effective research. They eliminated the four following non-essential Teaching/Learning benchmarks because they had only limited applicability:

1. Courses are designed to require students to work in groups utilizing problem-solving activities in order to develop topic understanding;
2. Course materials promote collaboration among students;

3. Courses are separated into self-contained segments (modules) that can be used to assess student mastery before moving forward in the course or program;

4. The modules/segments are of varying lengths determined by the complexity of learning outcomes.

In the course structure category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) identified the following quality standards (or benchmarks) as essential: (1) student advisement before starting an online program; (2) the provision of supplemental course information; (3) access to sufficient library resources, and (4) agreements between faculty and students upon expectations regarding response times. The two following non-essential course structure benchmarks were discarded in Phase 3 of the study: (a) specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments and (b) faculty are required to grade and return all assignments within a certain time.

In the student support category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) selected the following four essential bookmarks: (1) receiving information about program requirements, (2) the provision of hands-on training with digital services, (3) access to technical assistance, and (4) quick response times regarding questions directed to student service personnel. The four quality standards in this category were evident in the literature (Phase 1 of study) and were widely applied in recognized, leading online learning program (Phase 3 of the study).

In the faculty support category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) identified the following quality standards (or benchmarks) as essential: (1) available technical assistance in
course development, (2) assistance in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction, (3) ongoing training and assistance, and (4) the provision of written resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically accessed data. The four quality standards in this category were evident in the literature (Phase 1 of study) and were widely applied by leading online learning programs (Phase 3 of the study).

In the Evaluation and Assessment category, the IHEP report (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000) described these essential quality standards (or benchmarks): (1) ongoing assessment of the program’s educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process, (2) the evaluation of program effectiveness being based on data, and (3) the regular review of learning outcomes. The two benchmarks in this category were evident in the literature (Phase 1 of study) and were widely applied by leading online learning programs (Phase 3 of the study).

Phipps and Merisotis (2000) concluded the IHEP report by affirming that the 24 quality standards (or benchmarks) identified were not only important for institutions to focus in their online courses, but that the institutions needed their policies, practices, and procedures needed to support these standards as well. They concluded from the various surveys and interviews with students, faculty, and administrators that the absence of these 24 quality standards would detract from the quality of any online course or program. Novak (2002) believed that IHEP’s 24 benchmarks in Quality on the Line are necessary, but he claimed that they alone are not sufficient to ensure quality. As good as the Quality on the Line report is, in Novak’s opinion, more work needs to be conducted.

Quality on the Line has been an influential set of quality standards for online learning. It is very thorough, comprehensive, and holistic. It examined online learning programs in seven
different vital areas. The study also focused on practical applications. It is easy to theorize about only learning. However, in Phase 2 and 3, the study examined if benchmarks from the literature were actually used in real-life online teaching practice. They were willing to cut away several “good” benchmarks because they were not widely used or implemented. One might view the limited scope of the selection process in Phase 2 as a problem. However, the study has had broad appeal and has influenced further research and institutional practice, so the limited scope does not appear to be an issue (Raybon, 2012; Sherry, 2003). Quality on the Line was one of the first and most influential studies related to standards of quality in online learning. Any study into standards of quality in Christian online theological education must include and built from it (Novak, 2002).

Regional Accrediting Commissions’ Joint Statement

While IHEP was working on standards of quality, the eight regional accreditation associations -- which are nationally respected as they assure common articulation standards between secondary, college, and graduate schools -- were also responding to “present extraordinary and distinct challenges” brought about by online learning’s growth (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001). The eight regional accreditation associations joined together to draft the Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001). This joint statement expressed a set of three commitments aimed at ensuring high quality in distance education. The three commitments included: (1) commitment to those traditions, principles, and values that have guided the associations’
approach to educational innovation; (2) commitment to cooperation among the eight regional commissions directed toward a consistent approach to the evaluation of distance education informed through collaboration with others; and (3) commitment to supporting good practice among institutions.

After the Council of Regional Accrediting Commission’s (2001) joint statement affirming their commitments, the last section included a separate document called *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001). This document revealed the Council’s standards of quality (or benchmarks) that were to guide each regional accrediting body when evaluating an institution’s online programs.

*Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001) focused on five components. The first component was “Institutional Context and Commitment.” It examined whether or not a distance education program fit the institution’s mission and if the institution could support offering the program(s). The second component was “Curriculum and Instruction.” This section focused on ensuring that qualified faculty have prepared the online course content and learning resources. The third component was “Faculty Support.” This section recognized that the same faculty who developed the curriculum may not be the ones who deliver/teach it. Thus, they attempted to ensure that the faculty delivering the curriculum received the support they need. The fourth component was “Student Support.” Recognizing the changing nature of students, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions mandated that all aspects of the institution (e.g., library resources, academic advisement) are adequately available to distance students. The fifth
component was “Evaluation and Assessment.” This component required that institutions conduct sustained, evidence-based inquiries to see if the online programs offered are actually meeting their intended aims and purpose. Within the Council’s five emphases, 29 numbered paragraphs addressed specific matters considered essential to a quality distance education. Overall, between the five components examined and the 29 specific essentials mentioned, 107 protocols emerged that institutions could ask themselves to evaluate their online learning program. Table 5 shows how the specific elements and 107 protocols are distributed (Raybon, 2012).

### Table 5. Distribution of SACS Best Practices by Components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution of SACS Best Practices by Components (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2001)</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Protocols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Context</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation / Assessment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> *Also contains six criteria for evaluating consortia or contractual services.*

As one might expect, the accreditation criteria placed heavy emphasis on institutional issues and infrastructure. Over half of all the elements and protocols focused on institutional context (e.g., budget and policy statements by the institution related to electronic programs, adequate technical infrastructure) and evaluation/assessment (e.g., institutional assessment of curriculum outcomes, documented procedures assuring the safety of personal information,
various institutional assessment measures). The regional accrediting agencies (e.g., SACS) placed less emphasis on the design, development, and delivery of online courses than on larger institutional factors. However, as this current research study focuses on standards of quality in Christian online theological education, it is important to include the Council of Regional Accrediting Commission’s work in the discussion. The regional accrediting agencies help set overall standards for higher education. As a result, any discussion on standards of quality in Christian online theological education would be missing key data if it did not include the regional accrediting agencies’ statements regarding online learning.

**Best Online Instructional Practices**

With the regional accreditation agencies roughly defining what a quality online program must provide institutionally, various entities began to explore how to evaluate standards of quality in an online course. One of the most rigorous and thorough studies is an ongoing one conducted by the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) called Best Online Instructional Practices (BOIP). UMUC is a school known for offering innovative educational solutions that fit students’ lives and presently one of the largest online schools in the United States. UMUC’s BOIP is an ongoing mixed methods study that aims at identifying processes for effective online learning. The BOIP consists of three phases.

Phase 1 of the UMUC BOIP began by examining best online learning practices and principles with faculty (Keeton, 2004). Phase 1 consisted of both conducting a pilot study and then a formal study. The pilot study consisted of two parts. In Part 1 of the pilot study, faculty who used the IPI were surveyed and interviewed. Eight online faculty—selected by their deans
and identified by students as highly effective online teachers—were surveyed using a prototype Instructional Practices Inventory (IPI). Researchers developed the IPI around the eight principles from Keeton’s (2004) Effectiveness and Efficiency in Higher Education for Adults, a work largely built upon Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) essay. The eight principles were:

1. Make learning goals and one or more paths to them clear.
2. Use extensive and deliberate practice.
3. Provide prompt and constructive feedback.
4. Provide an optimal balance of challenge and support that is tailored to the individual student’s readiness and potential.
5. Elicit active and critical reflection by learners on their growing experience base.
6. Link inquiries to genuine problems or issues of high interest to the learners.
7. Develop learners’ effectiveness as learners early in their education.
8. Create an institutional environment that supports and encourages inquiry (Keeton, 2004).

The researchers found that participating instructors generally practiced five of the eight principles above. In Part 2 of the pilot study, researchers asked participants to review their each other’s courses using the IPI. The end goal of the pilot was to modify the initial IPI tool (Whitesel, Abdul-Hamid, & Lewis, 2005).

The second part of Phase 1 of the BOIP study expanded the sample to a broader base of UMUC online instructors (Keeton, 2004). Researchers invited 150 UMUC online instructors to use the revised IPI tool to self-evaluate their teaching practices. Seventy-six percent of the invited instructors participated. From that base, researchers selected 30 instructors to
interview because their IPI results and student evaluations had signaled them out as “exemplary faculty.”

Phase 2 of the formal BOIP (Keeton, 2004) study focused on the 30 “exemplary faculty” identified in Phase 1. They interviewed and conducted focus groups with the selected faculty to explore best practices further. The qualitative results identified five categories of effective online teaching practices. The five categories are Fostering Interaction, Providing Feedback, Facilitating Learning, and Maintaining Enthusiasm, and Organization (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006).

In Phase 3, researchers focused on outcomes. They focused on students’ grades and faculty and student satisfaction levels in courses that supposedly implemented best practices. Through a pilot test, researchers were able to create another formal mixed-methods analysis for testing. The results of the study showed that both course interactivity and students’ satisfaction and engagement improved markedly when faculty aligned course goals with learning activities, learning formats, and assessment methods (Whitesel, Abdul-Hamid, & Lewis, 2005).

While many institutions and consortiums have begun evaluating best online practices at the institutional and course level, UMUC’s BOIP study has been one of the most thorough and rigorous studies completed by an individual school (Raybon, 2012). UMUC’s BOIP study is also ongoing. UMUC uses their research to guide their online learning practices for over 3,000 of their online instructors. One could criticize the BOIP for limiting its research scope to one institution. However, BOIP has demonstrated broader impact and influence within online learning literature. The BOIP has also influenced additional research into online learning (Kim &
Bonk, 2006), been consulted in the development of other online evaluation tools (Quality Matter, 2011; Walker & Fraser, 2005), and encouraged effective online teaching in various academic disciplines (Blake, 2013; Grandzol, 2006; Ke & Xie, 2009; Varvel, 2007).

**Online Learning Consortium: Five Pillars and a Scorecard**

The Online Learning Consortium (OLC), formerly called the Sloan Consortium (Sloan C), is a consortium of institutions and organizations committed to quality online education. They have developed a widely cited set of program standards for online learning in “Quality Framework for Asynchronous Learning Networks,” (Moore, 2011). OLC’s framework consists of five pillars intended to guide quality and effective practice. OLC’s five pillars for encouraging quality online learning in higher education and for corporations are listed in Table 6 below.

**Table 6.** Online Learning Consortium’s Five Pillars of Quality in Online Learning Programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Principles for Higher Education</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning effectiveness</td>
<td>Learning effectiveness, new knowledge, applied theory, continuous feedback from stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost effectiveness and institutional commitment</td>
<td>Cost effectiveness, brand recognition, scalability, public service and influence, prestige, funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Wider access including international communities, greater research and development opportunities, faster response to new fields of study, capacity enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (employee) satisfaction</td>
<td>New populations of students and colleagues, greater satisfaction with teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student (customer) Satisfaction</td>
<td>Learner and teacher satisfaction and loyalty, career opportunities including OJT, internships, and mentorships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table adapted from Moore (2011).*
OLC’s five pillars serve more as a set of guiding principles than a specific assessment device. However, OLC has also developed a variety of measurement tools based on these five pillars to measure online learning effectiveness.

Each of the five pillars has its own particular emphasis. The first pillar is learning effectiveness. The primary concern of this pillar is to ensure that online learning is just as effective (or more effective) than on-campus learning. Online learning programs need to use assessment and evaluation tools to make sure comparable learning outcomes occur. The second pillar focuses on how committed an institution is to online learning. It examines whether or not institutions are continually striving to improve their services, influence, and brand. It also examines whether they strive to be cost effective and if tuition and fees truly reflect the cost to deliver courses. The third pillar deals with access. By focusing on access, institutions strive to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn and that appropriate student support services are available. The access pillar also seeks to ensure that courses stay current within their academic fields. The fourth pillar is faculty satisfaction. The faculty satisfaction pillar challenges institutions to work to ensure faculty success and happiness with online teaching. It strives to help faculty see how online teaching fits into their overall faculty role. The fifth pillar focuses on student satisfaction. The student satisfaction pillar determines whether students are successful in their courses and pleased with their online learning experiences. This pillar strives to ensure that the online learning experience matches or exceed student expectations in all areas (Davis, 2010).

In addition to the five pillars, OLC also endorsed a quality scorecard for online learning programs developed by Shelton (2010). Shelton’s scorecard built upon IHEP’s previous work on
benchmarks. It identified 70 quality indicators distributed among nine different focal areas: institutional support, technical support, course development and instructional design, course structure, teaching and learning, social and student support, faculty support, student support, as well as evaluation and assessment.

The Online Learning Consortium’s (formerly called Sloan Consortium) work has tremendous impact and influence on online learning. Their quality framework and five pillars form a foundation for their work that includes popular annual conferences on online, various influential research and publications, and various faculty development programs and resources. Four hundred eighty-two higher education institutions, who are annual members of the Online Learning Consortium (Sloan Consortium, 2013), access and use OLC tools and resources. OLC also provides consultation services that help schools use these tools to evaluate and improve their online programs.

Given how influential the Online Learning Consortium’s work related to online learning has been and continues to be, it is necessary to include their work in any discussion on standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Their five pillars may seem aimed at online learning from a leadership or administrative level. However, they offer a wide range of literature, workshops, and conferences that aim at helping both administrators and instructors. OLC is prominent force helping to influence quality in online learning. Christian online theological must factor their work.
**Quality Matters**

The Quality Matters Program offers a set of standards and promotes a faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online and blended courses. Other evaluation methods may focus on the quality of an online program, but Quality Matters focuses on quality at the individual course level; and it has created a rubric that allows trained faculty peers to review courses and ensure their quality. The Quality Matters rubric (2011) contained eight general standards for online course design and structure:

1. The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course,
2. Learning objectives are measureable and clearly stated,
3. Assessment strategies are designed to evaluate student progress by reference to stated learning objectives; to measure the effectiveness of student learning; and to be integral to the learning process,
4. Instructional materials are sufficiently comprehensive to achieve stated course objectives and learning outcomes,
5. Forms of interaction incorporated in the course motivate students and promote learning,
6. Course navigation and technology support student engagement and ensure access to course components,
7. The course facilitates student access to institutional support services essential to student success, and
8. The course demonstrates a commitment to accessibility for all students.
Along with the Online Learning Consortium, Quality Matters is an elite organization encouraging higher education’s development of online learning. Quality Matters provides a faculty-centric, peer reviewed process to certify the quality of an online course. It started from a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and later became a self-supporting organization that provides various rubrics, resources, conferences, etc. to educational institutions. Quality Matters currently serves over 750 subscribing higher educational institutions.

At present, the Quality Matters program may provide the most thorough tools related to standards of quality when designing online courses. While other groups or tools may focus on the macro level of quality in online learning, Quality Matters focuses on the most essential element in online learning -- the online course. One major strength of Quality Matters program when compared to the other tools is their faculty-centric approach. Their model for measuring quality relies on training peer evaluators who are equipped to evaluate a course using the Quality Matters standards. Their approach is very relational with faculty at this micro (course) level. It is very faculty friendly, and their rubric (2011) was also very well developed. It was informed by a wide wealth of literature. The Quality Matter’s program also undergoes periodic review to keep it current. While some of the other sets mentioned above may provide a macro view to standards of quality in online learning (OLC, the regional accrediting agencies, etc.), Quality Matters provides a thorough micro-level view. Quality Matter’s program and course-level assessment is a necessary inclusion for identifying standards of quality in online learning for Christian theological education.
Summary

Christian theological education is a specific type of Christian higher education. While Christian education is broad and inclusive of all Christian educational efforts, and Christian higher education focuses on all Christian higher education focuses on all postsecondary education, Christian theological education is a subset within both of them. It has unique aims and purposes. ATS is the largest, most influential accreditation of theological schools in the United States and summarizes the contemporary purpose of Christian theological education. ATS states that Christian theological education requires students to be educated in four areas: (1) religious heritage, (2) cultural context, (3) personal and spiritual formation, and (4) capacity for ministerial and public leadership (ATS, 2012a).

Online learning is revolutionizing Christian theological education. While the history of distance learning in Christian theological education has developed slowly, lagging behind the rest of higher education as a whole, Christian online theological education has grown immensely in its brief history. During that time, Christian theological institutions have faced many issues -- pedagogical, spiritual, technological, theological, etc. -- related to online learning. As online learning has rippled through theological institutions, it has become a vital, strategic force within contemporary theological education. As Christian online learning moves into its second decade and accreditation standards have become more accepting of it, research that explores standards of quality in Christian online theological is increasingly necessary.

While standards of quality discussions may be new to Christian online theological education, they are not new to online learning in higher education. While debates and detractors still exist today, the educational literature related to online learning marks 1999 as
the pivotal year when there was “no significant difference” between online learning and traditional on-campus education (Russell, 1999). From that historical turning point, higher education began examining “best practices” and standards of quality in online learning. For over a decade, higher educational research has explored these matters, and several important sets of quality standards have emerged. With Christian online theological education approaching its own historical turning point, it is vital that theological educators be informed about best practices in online learning in higher education and begin identifying standards of quality in Christian online theological education.
CHAPTER THREE:
RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study is to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Higher education, generally speaking, has discussed standards in online learning for more than a decade (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1997; Moore, 2011; Novak, 2002; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Sherry, 2003). However, Christian online theological education is only now evolving to this point. As online learning expands and matures within Christian theological education, establishing standards of quality will help facilitate excellence within it (Aleshire, 2006; ATS, 2012b).

The results of this study address a significant issue in Christian online theological education: defining quality. By identifying what quality is within Christian online theological education, this study may help encourage the field toward conversations about standards of quality for designing and developing online courses.

Once standards of quality have been identified for Christian online theological courses, educators can use them as guidelines in course development as well as for evaluating existing online courses. By identifying standards of quality for online course design, it also encourages theological educators to reflect on standards of quality for the online course delivery. Establishing standards of quality in online learning will significantly help Christian online theological education mature, improve, and develop.
Research Method Defined

This study was planned originally as a non-experimental, explanatory sequential mixed method research design (Creswell, 2015a). The intent was to collect initial quantitative research by surveying a group of recognized experts within the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), analyze those results, and conduct a live, online follow-up focus group that would further explain and elaborate on the initial survey’s findings (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Planned Research Design: An Explanatory, Sequential Mixed Methods Study.

It was anticipated that the live, online focus group would be a viable means of getting follow-up explanatory data. However, during the midpoint of conducting this study, it became necessary to alter and adapt the research method.

After the initial quantitative survey research had been collected and analyzed (step 1 and 2 in Figure 2 above), the next step was to conduct a qualitative, live, online, focus group interview (step 3 in Figure 2). Twelve participants from the survey volunteered for the focus group interview. In the following four weeks, several attempts were made to schedule the
online focus group. Due to cancellations, not receiving enough confirmations to conduct a focus group, and multiple failed attempts to re-schedule, volunteer participants asked if they could forgo the live focus group and complete an online questionnaire instead. Due to the various difficulties mentioned above and participants' requests, if any follow-up data was to be gained, it became necessary to adjust how follow-up data would be collected. The researcher had to change the research method from the planned explanatory, sequential mixed methods approach to a descriptive survey research method. The goal was to gather explanatory, follow-up data via an Internet questionnaire. Figure 3 below demonstrates how the research method was adapted from what was originally planned to the research method utilized in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Originally Planned Research Method</th>
<th>Research Method Utilized in this Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Administration and Data Collection</td>
<td>Survey Administration and Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Data Analysis</td>
<td>Survey Data Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Interview/Questionnaire and Data Collection</td>
<td>Follow-up Internet Questionnaire and Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Data Analysis</td>
<td>Follow-up Questionnaire Data Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Adapting Originally Planned Research Method to Method Utilized.

Once adapted, this study followed a non-experimental, descriptive survey research method (Robson, 2011). Considering no prior research study that incorporates quantitative research exists on standards of quality in Christian online theological education, a descriptive
survey research study creates a collective starting point from which a larger conversation on the topic can emerge.

Even though the research method had to be adapted during the study, survey studies are a very effective means of research. Adapting this study to a descriptive survey research method was ideal for the following reasons:

1. Surveys enabled the researcher to collect answers to questions that show the particular values, attitudes, beliefs, and motives from others. They facilitated conversation between the researcher and study participants (Campanelli, 2008).

2. Surveys are adaptable and allowed the researcher to collect generalizable information from the sample (Robson, 2011). Considering the originally intended focus group questions had to be adapted into a follow-up Internet questionnaire, the flexibility and adaptability of surveys was particularly useful for this study.

3. Surveys provided the researcher with an instrument that produced high amounts of data standardization. Thanks to this characteristic, participants in this study saw the same questions in the same format and highly reliable data was obtained from participants.

4. Surveys allowed many “conversations” to take place simultaneously, which means they were extremely efficient for gathering large amounts of data, and allowed the data from those conversations to be collected quickly and cheaply (Campanelli, 2008). During the follow-up portion of this study, the speed and efficiency of surveys allowed for some data to be gathered instead of none.
5. Surveys offered the participants anonymity. In this study, the anonymity that surveys provide encouraged more honest and open responses, especially in regards to research questions #2 and #3.

6. Surveys allowed the researcher to tailor each instrument to the desired research aim (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). Given that the focus group interview protocol needed to be adapted into an Internet questionnaire, the tailoring the questionnaire to gather follow-up data was vital in this study.

Utilizing a survey research method, this study collected and analyzed two sets of data on standards of quality in Christian online theological education (Creswell, 2015a; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This study collected: (1) initial Internet survey data and (2) follow-up Internet questionnaire data. The initial Internet survey results provided indicated what Christian distance learning professionals perceive as standards of quality. Follow-up Internet questionnaire data gathered was intended to provide a second set of information that would help: (a) ensure the accuracy of the initial survey findings, (b) provide a layer of explanation to the initial survey results, (c) identify specific issues of implementing the standards identified by the survey, (d) add a layer of personal experience related to implementing quality standards, and (e) provide a comprehensive view that would lead to reliable conclusions about quality standards in Christian online theological education (Bryman, 2006; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2015b; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). The “Instrument” section below provides further information on how the research instruments used in this study were created; the “Procedures” section indicates how these instruments were administered and any issues encountered when using them. Overall, the descriptive
survey research design helped this study identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education and gathered important data on each of this study’s research questions.

**Research Questions**

The focus of this study is to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education and issues implementing them, as indicated by experts in the field. This study examined three research questions.

1. What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?

2. To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?

3. What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?

**Role of the Researcher**

Every researcher brings their personal milieu of ideas, experiences, theories, influences, and perspective to their studies. These internal realities residing in the minds of researchers impact any study (Creswell, 2015a). Rather than leave these internal realities about the
researcher lurking in the background, relevant background data is revealed. During this study, the researcher has been employed by a large, ATS accredited, Christian, theological seminary in the Southeastern region of the United States. He served as the Director of Online Learning over both a graduate and an undergraduate program, and has led an online learning program that is larger than the average total student headcount at 94% of ATS accredited schools (ATS, 2015).

The researcher is from a generation that has lived through the revolutionary educational changes brought about by rapid growth in communication and educational technology. When he started elementary school, early Apple II computers were just beginning to infiltrate computer labs. By the time he ended high school, laptops, the internet, and online learning were spreading rapidly and commonly used in education.

The researcher has lived between two educational worlds and actively serves within both. He holds both a Master of Divinity (M.Div) and a Master of Theology (Th.M) from an ATS accredited school and culminates his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) educational pursuit at a large, public university with this study. In addition to serving various Christian organizations, the researcher has also worked with corporate and online education at a large, regionally accredited college and has been a conference presenter at various higher education conferences (e.g., Lilly Conferences on Teaching and Learning, Online Learning Consortium’s Annual International Conference, and Campus Technology’s Annual Education Technology Conference).

The researcher has been an educational administrator within Christian theological education during a time of rapid educational technology revolution. He has led a rapidly growing arm of an educational organization that has been experiencing radical educational
change. He has worked with both faculty and administrators in the design and delivery of online education and has served as Director of Online Learning while helping his institution navigate through the shifting educational landscape.

Participants

This research study surveyed a sample population of experts and leaders in Christian online theological education. Within the field of practice in Christian online theological education, the Association of Theological School’s Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) has been the dominant professional community. The TTEG membership consists of 260 educational leaders at ATS accredited schools who are engaged in information technology and online learning strategies (S. Mahfood, personal communication, January 9, 2014). The TTEG has six goals:

a. To facilitate interaction and collaboration,

b. To provide knowledge of available technical tools and learning theory models for enhanced instruction,

c. To provide methods to support online literacy to students and alumni for academic and pastoral growth,

d. To support research and publication,

e. To share innovative projects and exemplary practices, and

f. To offer insights to the ATS Commission on Accrediting (ATS, 2014).

While the overall TTEG consists of various individuals engaged in online learning leadership, this study focuses specifically on Directors of Online Learning (and closely associated job titles)
because they represent the members who are most engaged with Christian online theological education.

Sample

This study conducted a purposeful, mostly homogenous, sampling of experts in Christian online theological education. The goal of this study was to discover standards of quality as identified by the sample. In order to achieve that goal, this study limited its scope to a small, intentionally selected sample of knowledgeable experts. The literature describes this approach as a purposeful sampling technique (Hibberts, Johnson, & Hudson, 2012). With purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals who have specific knowledge or characteristics needed for a study (Hibberts, Johnson, & Hudson, 2012). Such individuals are typically “information rich” in the specific topic of the study and have expertise worth discovering (Patton, 2002).

In Christian theological education, Directors of Online Learning (and those holding similar positions within institutions who are directly involved in online learning leadership, such as Associate Vice Presidents of Online Learning, Associate Deans of Distance Education, etc.) provide primary leadership for online learning programs. When this study was conducted, the Directors of Online Learning (and related job titles) associated with the TTEG represent the most engaged community of ATS online learning leaders within Christian online theological education. There are currently 78 persons identified as Director of Online Learning (or an associated position) on the TTEG’s annual list (S. Mahfood, personal communication, October
A purposeful sample of this experienced and knowledgeable group from ATS accredited schools was the best selection of experts possible when this study was conducted.

This study’s sample was mostly homogenous, meaning the people in the sample possess similar traits and characteristics (Creswell, 2015b). For this study, a subgroup of the TTEG was sampled -- Directors of Online Learning (or related titles) who are part of ATS’s TTEG group. This purposeful sample of ATS Christian online learning professionals was considered mostly homogenous because they share similar professional characteristics:

1. Job titles—Director of Online Learning (or related titles);
2. Job responsibilities (leading an online learning program);
3. Professional ambitions (expanding theological education globally through online and distance learning);
4. Experience within the field (typically two years or more leading an online learning program);
5. Educational background (possessing at least one seminary degree and likely a PhD);
6. Institutional accreditation (all belong to ATS accredited schools);
7. Educational goals (they believe in the purposes and aims of graduate theological education).

While the sample was mostly homogenous in their professional profile, it did have differences. The sample differed in (a) theological beliefs/ denominational affiliation, (b) age, (c) gender, (d) years in administrative leadership, (e) educational training related to online learning, and (f)
specific field/discipline of their educational background. However, even though some differences existed, this sample had far more in common professionally than differences.

Sample Selection Methods

The participants in this study came from the TTEG and completed an initial survey and follow-up questionnaire. The methods for survey sample and follow-up selection are described below.

Initial Survey Sample Selection

This study sampled the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The researcher contacted the leaders of the TTEG and inquired about conducting the study among the online learning leaders involved with TTEG. The researcher created a spreadsheet of the 78 TTEG members holding the Director of Online Learning (or associated) job title. The spreadsheet has columns for name, school, email address, and job title. All 78 TTEG members on the list were invited to participate in the initial survey, and a self-selected sample was collected from TTEG members who were Directors of Online Learning (or held closely related job titles).

Follow-up Internet Questionnaire Sample Selection

For the follow-up aspect of this study, participants were self-selected on a volunteer basis. Creswell (2015a) stated that asking for volunteers at the end of a survey is a popular and acceptable technique for identifying follow-up participants. When follow-up participants are
knowledgeable about the initial survey (due to their participation), they are better equipped to answer follow-up questions about its findings. In this study, 12 participants volunteered to participate in the follow-up process out of the 24 people who participated in the initial survey. All 12 volunteer participants were invited to take part in the follow-up Internet questionnaire. Additional information on participants and response rates is discussed in the procedure section.

**Instruments**

This research study followed a survey research method. It aimed to discover standards of quality in Christian online theological education through the administration of two surveys: (1) an initial survey to gather initial data on the research questions and (2) a follow-up Internet questionnaire to explain the initial survey’s findings. The development of the surveys is described below.

**Initial Survey Development**

The first instrument developed for this research study was a survey. The survey instrument was designed to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Figure 4 provides an overview of the development process in flowchart format. The following section describes the process in detail.
Literature review. Before the conceptualization of the initial survey, a thorough literature review of the three primary areas related to this study was conducted. The first area of literature clarified Christian theological education’s place within Christian education and identified the unique purpose of Christian theological education. The second area identified issues that adoption of online learning faces within Christian online theological education. The final area examined standards of quality in online higher education in order to provide a foundation for exploring the topic within Christian online theological education.
This systematic examination of the literature guided the selection of the content of the survey. As Hox, Leeuw, and Dillman (2008) stated, “Before [survey] questions can be formulated, researchers must decide which concepts they wish to measure,” (p. 5). The literature review provided an abundance of potential standards to include in the survey. Specifically, a list of 247 items was compiled from a variety of existing lists and rubrics related to standards of quality in higher education, important items mentioned in the literature, and other elements added by the researcher’s personal knowledge of the field.

**Survey construction.** The next step in the survey construction process was to reduce the list of standards to create a manageable survey instrument. First, the compiled list of 247 identified items was examined for duplicates and/or similarities. During this examination, the researcher identified 117 redundancies, narrowing the field to 130 items. Second, potential survey statements/questions were crafted from the remaining list of standards. After careful consideration, it was decided that 130 statements might require too much time for survey participants and would likely result in an insufficient response rate. The list was reviewed again (Graf, 2002). The researcher conducted another examination of the items seeking to eliminate further redundancies while also considering the instrument’s usability for participants.

Graf (2002) recommended that surveys should contain 25 items or less. Also, Fowler and Cosenza (2008) suggested that surveys should take no more than ten minutes to complete. After examining again for duplicates and factoring in the usability of the survey, the researcher reduced the 130 statements to 35. It was believed that the remaining items would efficiently yet adequately, survey the issue of quality in Christian online theological education. Also, the
researcher knew that the validity and reliability testing of the instrument (discussed below) would identify any content and/or usability issues.

By their nature, surveys and their questions are imperfect, indirect instruments (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). However, in creating the survey questions, the researcher followed three standards drawn from the literature. The first standard was to design one question per targeted content item (Groves et al., 2009). Survey questions can suffer from trying to measure too many different pieces of information per question, therefore this survey intentionally focused each question on only one piece of information. The second standard was to ensure that each question was a quality question. To achieve quality or excellence in survey questions, they must ask for the right content, provide respondents with the appropriate cognitive information to respond, and have a technical user-friendliness ensuring high usability (Fowler & Cosenza, 2008). The third standard followed was to design simple, clear, and easily understood questions (Groves et al., 2009). These three standards guided the development of questions in the survey instrument. While surveys and their questions are never perfect, questions that measure one piece of information, consist of the right content, and are easily understood contribute to a more effective research instrument (Fowler & Cosenza, 2008).

The survey questions created for this study were aimed at discovering participants’ attitudes, perceptions, and opinions at a given point in time on quality standards in Christian online theological education (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). The survey questions attempted to avoid unfamiliar, overly complex, or technical words and phrases (Fowler & Cosenza, 2008). These questions also attempted to avoid embedded assumptions about the participants’ views. Avoiding embedded assumptions in the questions allowed participants to respond to the
relevant information on its own merit without any underlying assumptions built into the question (Fowler & Credenza, 2008).

Regarding how data was gathered, this survey was conducted via the Internet. This study used SurveyGizmo (2006) to host the survey and collect the responses. SurveyGizmo was chosen for several reasons, including: a more professional-looking interface than other available platforms, validation features that use web browser cookies to prevent duplicate responses (SurveyGizmo, 2013e), HTML text editing to improve visual design options (SurveyGizmo, 2013c), and an array of visual reporting features that assist with survey administration and analysis (SurveyGizmo, 2013b). SurveyGizmo also allows the researcher to schedule automatic reminder messages (SurveyGizmo, 2013f), creates visually appealing and user-friendly table-matrix questions (SurveyGizmo, 2013d), provides a variety of tracking tools (SurveyGizmo, 2013b), and helps assure participant anonymity (SurveyGizmo, 2013a).

The initial Internet survey consisted of six screens. (See Appendix A) The first screen included an introduction to the survey, estimated time commitment, directions on how to complete it, and the informed consent statement for participants. The second screen consisted of twelve brief questions aimed at collecting background about the participants. Four questions were “closed,” meaning participants must select one answer from selections provided. Six questions were “open,” requiring participants to type in a brief answer. Two items were open-ended, follow-up questions for participants who answered “yes” to a previous question. These particular items asked participants to provide additional information on particular background items via a brief, short answer question (see Appendix A).
The third screen displayed one table/grid question containing the 35 statements crafted from the literature review related to quality standards in Christian online theological education. When conducting an Internet survey on several similar and related items, a table/grid (or sometimes called matrix) format can be helpful. As Manfreda and Vehovar (2008) stated, “Grid [table or matrix] questions are often used to make the questionnaire look shorter,” (pp. 265-266). Additionally, less cognitive effort is needed when the same response columns are used for all items in a grid, which makes the survey more user-friendly (Dillman, 2007). Using the table/grid question in this survey to measure participant’s perceptions of quality standards would save participants time, make the survey easier to complete, and reduce redundancy (Couper, Traugott, & Lamias, 2001).

On the third screen, these 35 statements related to quality standards in Christian online theological education were listed in the far left column of the table/grid question (see Appendix A). A 5-point Likert scale comprised the remaining columns of the table/grid. Participants were asked to agree or disagree along a 5-point Likert scale as to the statements’ degree of importance to quality standards in Christian online theological education. The 5-point Likert scale continuum progressed from “strongly disagree” on the left side to “strongly agree” on the right side. By responding to each item on the table/grid, participants were able to identify if they thought a particular standard was important to quality in Christian online theological education or not.

The fourth screen presented one question asking participants if their current online program is consistent with the ideals they identified on the previous page. This question examined if a gap existed between an online leader’s ideals and their current practices. It also
used a 5-point Likert scale. Anticipating that respondents might be inclined to answer positively when evaluating their own program, a 5-point Likert scale provided a greater range of choices (Groves et al., 2009). The five labels for the Likert scale used were (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

The fifth screen presented two open-ended questions. The first open-ended question allowed participants to write-in additional items they thought should be included as quality standards. The second open-ended question gave participants the opportunity to contribute additional information or comments.

The sixth screen focused on gathering focus group volunteers. It highlighted information about the follow-up focus group and asked participants if they would like volunteer to participate. This page included two non-required open-ended questions to gather contact information for the follow-up focus group. The first question asked participants to enter their email address, and the second question asked them to enter their name. The seventh screen presented participants with a “thank you” page acknowledging that they had completed the survey.

Through the execution of several trials, data from the SurveyGizmo software, and pilot test feedback, the researcher estimated it would take 5-10 minutes to complete the survey. Bosnjak and Batinic (2002) identified that the majority of survey participants are willing to invest ten minutes in a survey, especially if they perceive the survey results will benefit the larger community.
Each question in the initial survey related to one of the first two research questions. Table 7 demonstrates how the survey instrument’s questions corresponded to this study’s research questions.

**Table 7. Initial Survey Question’s Relationship to Research Questions.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #1</td>
<td>13 (matrix question with 35 sub-questions), 15, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #3</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Questions</td>
<td>1 -- 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Validity of the survey.** A valid instrument is “one which measures what it is intended to measure,” (De Vaus, 1986). To ensure the validity of the instrument, the survey was pilot tested and reviewed by a panel of experts. Groves et al. (2009) identified both pilot testing and expert reviews as two of their recommended methods for establishing valid survey questions. Campanelli (2008) also highlighted both practices as vital steps in finalizing a survey/questionnaire.

After IRB approval to conduct this study (Appendix B), regarding validity, the pilot test examined if the survey instrument was clear, if the survey questions conveyed enough information for participants to answer them, and if the survey participants could easily complete it. Sudman (1976) suggested that 5-10 respondents is an appropriate size for a pilot study to recognize any major flaws in an instrument. This pilot test group consisted of seven members from an ATS accredited institution. The members of the pilot test were two Christian
online theological faculty who had five or more years’ experience teaching online, two instructional designers who had two or more years’ experience designing Christian online theological education, and three administrators who had two or more years’ experience leading online learning within Christian theological education. Pilot test participants were asked to complete the survey and a pilot test questionnaire (see Appendix C).

The literature suggests that having a panel of experts review the instrument adds a second layer of validity in instrument development. Review by a panel of experts helps ensure that a survey asks the correct questions and does not convey any incorrect ideas (Groves et al., 2009). Dillman (2007) indicated that review by knowledgeable colleagues for analysis can help improve survey design, and Robson (2011) agreed that expert feedback is helpful in eliminating any duplicate content errors. Also, Campanelli (2008) suggested a panel of three to four participants as sufficient for expert review of a survey instrument.

For this study, a panel of four expert members reviewed the initial survey. Two of the four expert panel members were from a large, regionally accredited Christian university highly experienced with online learning. The other two expert panel members were from two different, large, ATS accredited theological institutions. All members were from a leading online Christian university or theological school, had five or more years of experience administrating online programs, and held either Director of Online Learning or a closely associated job title. The panel of experts reviewed the survey in draft form (Appendix A) and completed a specific questionnaire to gather their feedback (Appendix D).

**Reliability of the survey.** Reliability “is the extent to which people in comparable situations will answer questions in similar ways,” (Fowler, 1993, p. 80). An instrument’s
unreliability is defined as the extent that there is inconsistency in responses. Several factors can cause unreliable data, including: (1) ambiguous and/or unclear questions, (2) non-standardized procedures, and (3) participant fatigue (Creswell, 2015b; Rudner, 1993). The goal for this study was to create a reliable survey instrument. Therefore, this study utilized four strategies to support creating a reliable instrument.

First, the pilot study participants and the review by a panel of experts examined the survey instrument for ambiguous and/or unclear questions. They were asked to provide specific feedback on any question that might be unclear and to suggest specific improvements to the overall instrument. Second, the Survey Gizmo online survey service provided standardized survey administration. Via the Internet survey tool, all participants received an identical survey format. Third, the survey was tested to determine length of completion. Through gathered data from several trials, SurveyGizmo software, and pilot test feedback, on average, it was confirmed that the survey took less than 10 minutes to complete.

Lastly, to examine the instrument for reliability, the pilot study participants completed an alternate form reliability test. Alternate form reliability tests are one of five different common procedures for examining an instrument’s reliability (Creswell, 2015b). The researcher created an alternate form of the survey instrument that alters the naming and/or order of the answer options (see Appendix E). One week after the pilot study participants completed the first survey and the pilot study questionnaire, they were asked to take the alternate survey form. Alternate form survey responses were compared to the pilot test responses to examine the instrument’s reliability.
**Review and modification.** Feedback regarding recommended changes was collected from the pilot test, focus group review, and alternate form survey. Administration of the alternate form survey (Appendix E) revealed no significant or noticeable differences in the responses by participants on the draft survey (Appendix A). After analyzing the feedback from both the pilot test and focus group review, the survey instrument only needed minor modifications and adjustments (e.g. correcting verb usages, typos) and did not need any content changes or additions. Appendix G contains the revised survey used in this study.

**Follow-up Questionnaire Development**

As noted earlier, the original intent for this study was to conduct an explanatory, sequential mixed methods study. Follow-up data was to be collected via an online focus group interview. However, during the administration of the study, it became necessary to adapt the planned focus group interview questions into a follow-up Internet questionnaire. This section describes how the second instrument used in this study -- the follow-up Internet questionnaire -- was developed.

**Development of Planned Focus Group Interview Questions**

This study was planned originally as an explanatory, sequential mixed methods study and had to be adapted into a descriptive research survey. The change in research method, happened after: (1) the initial survey data had been collected and analyzed and (2) the focus group questions had been drafted, reviewed, modified, and tested for validity from the initial
survey data. The following section further describes how the follow-up Internet questionnaire was developed from the originally planned focus group interview questions.

**Draft of planned focus group interview questions.** The goal of the originally planned focus group, as seen in Appendix F, was twofold: (1) to provide participants with an opportunity to elaborate on the survey results and (2) to gain data from participants about the challenges, issues, and/or successes of implementing the key standards of quality identified by the survey results. The draft questions were constructed to meet both of these aims (see Appendix F).

The focus group interview protocol, in its draft form, consisted of nine open-ended questions. The focus group interview protocol utilized five different types of questions: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions (Krueger, 1997). The focus group interview was structured to move participants from general questions to more content specific ones as the group interview proceeded (Stewart, 2015). Question #1 asked participants to tell their name, where they live, and what institution they currently serve. Having everyone answer this question would allow the participants to be briefly acquainted and feel connected to the group. Question #2 introduced the topic for discussion (standards of quality in Christian online theological education) and would gather the group’s initial thoughts. Questions #3 through #5 would allow participants to explain and elaborate on the survey’s results. Question #6 transitioned the group from explaining the survey’s results to explaining the implementation of the standards of quality identified in the survey. Questions #7 and #8 asked participants deeper questions on the unique challenges, issues, and/or successes related to implementing those standards of quality. Question #9 was an ending question, useful for allowing participants to add concluding thoughts or mention anything that was not discussed. It also helped bring
closure to the discussion (Krueger, 1997). Since focus group interviews typically should not exceed twelve questions (Creswell, 2015b; Krueger, 1997; Steward, 2015), this draft allowed for up to an additional three questions to be added if deemed necessary.

**Review and modification of planned focus group questions.** The drafted focus group interview protocol was reviewed after the initial survey data was collected and analyzed. Reviewing and modifying draft qualitative questions was necessary to ensure that each question asked for an adequate explanation of the initial data (Creswell, 2015b). As can be seen in Table 8, some questions were modified, some remained the same, and others were added to empower the focus group to explain the survey results more effectively. Draft question #3 was revised to ask two different, specific questions about the survey data. Draft question #5 was edited to ask only for the top five standards. Revised focus group questions #8 and #9 were added to the protocol. Question #8 asked the focus group participants if they thought 3.8 out of 5 was an appropriate generalization for how all Christian leaders would feel about achieving their ideals. Question #9 was added to get participants’ general thoughts and impressions on the data from survey question #14. The originally drafted protocol did not include a question on the strengths of implementing standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Revised focus group question #11 was added to discover any strengths participants might identify.
Table 8. Comparing Revised Focus Group Questions to Original Draft.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drafted Focus Group Questions (pre-survey administration)</th>
<th>Revised Focus Group Questions (post-survey data collection and analysis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 1:</strong> Please tell us your name, where you live, and the institution you currently serve.</td>
<td>1. Please tell us your name, where you live, and the institution you currently serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 2:</strong> When you think of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, what comes to mind?</td>
<td>2. When you think of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, what comes to mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 3:</strong> Based on your experience and understanding, does the preliminary analysis of these results seem accurate?</td>
<td>3. From the survey results on the 35 items in question #13, should only the top 24 items—the ones with an average mean of 4.25 or higher—be identified as quality standards?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 4:</strong> How well do these findings reflect your experience and understanding of quality in online learning?</td>
<td>4. Question #15 on the survey asked about adding items to the list of standards. Of the 10 items suggested by participants to add, which ones should be added to a list of quality standards for Christian online theological education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 5:</strong> What are your top 5 or 10 standards of quality?</td>
<td>5. How well do these survey results reflect your experience and understanding of quality in online learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 6:</strong> As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?</td>
<td>6. If you had to pick five standards of quality that are most important to/for Christian online theological education, which ones would you select?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 6:</strong> As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?</td>
<td>7. As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draft Question 6:</strong> As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?</td>
<td>8. On question #14, participants were asked if they feel their institution implements standards of quality in Christian online theological education. The average response was 3.8 out of 5, indicating an average that was slightly below “agree.” Do you believe that most Christian online theological education programs would “agree” that they are achieving their ideals of quality?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drafted Focus Group Questions (pre-survey administration)</th>
<th>Revised Focus Group Questions (post-survey data collection and analysis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Out of all the Christian online theological education programs, do you believe that 76% of Christian online programs practice standards of quality?</td>
<td>9. Out of all the Christian online theological education programs, do you believe that 76% of Christian online programs practice standards of quality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Question 7: How well do you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey’s results?</td>
<td>10. How well do you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey’s results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. What are the strengths or successes one might encounter trying to implement standards of quality in Christian online theological education?</td>
<td>11. What are the strengths or successes one might encounter trying to implement standards of quality in Christian online theological education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Question 8: What are the challenges or issues one might encounter when trying to implement the standards of quality identified in this study’s findings?</td>
<td>12. What are the challenges or issues one might encounter when trying to implement the standards of quality identified in this study’s findings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Question 9: Are there any concluding thoughts that you have about standards of quality in online learning that you would like to share before we end?</td>
<td>13. Are there any concluding thoughts that you have about standards of quality in online learning that you would like to share before we end?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Creating the Follow-up Internet Questionnaire from the Planned Focus Group Interview Questions

The focus group interview questions were modified based on the initial survey data and were ready to administer to the volunteer participants. However, due to various scheduling conflicts, lack of confirmations to attend the online focus group, and requests from volunteer participants to complete the follow-up via a questionnaire, it was not possible to administer the focus group interview protocol as planned. Instead, the planned focus group interview questions needed to be transformed into a follow-up Internet questionnaire.
The follow-up Internet questionnaire was created to collect the same explanatory, follow-up data as had been originally planned. The same exact content questions from the revised focus group protocol (questions #2 through #13) guided the information that was collected from the Internet questionnaire. The only content change from the focus group interview to the follow-up Internet questionnaire happened with the opening question (question #1 in the revised focus group protocol in Table 8). Instead of the protocol's single opening question, the questionnaire had five basic background questions. The five basic background questions asked follow-up participants their institution’s size, how many years of administrative experience they had, if they had formal training in distance or online education, age, and gender.

In terms of layout and design, the follow-up Internet questionnaire began with five background questions and continued by asking 12 content questions that helped explain the initial survey’s results (see Appendix K for the questionnaire). The follow-up questionnaire’s first online page asked the five background questions mentioned above. The remainder of the follow-up Internet questionnaire offered the same 12 content questions originally planned for the revised focus group Interview protocol (see Appendix J). The questionnaire’s second online page included questions #2 - #11, which focused on research question #1. The questionnaire’s third online page focused on questions #12 - #14, which concentrated on research question #2. The questionnaire’s fourth online page asked questions #15 - #17, which collected data on research question #3. The questionnaire’s fifth online page confirmed that participants had completed the questionnaire and thanked them for their participation.
The initial quantitative survey and the adapted follow-up Internet questionnaire addressed each research question in this study. Table 9 highlights how each instrument’s questions relate to the research questions.

**Table 9.** Survey and Follow-up Questionnaire Question’s Relationship to Research Questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Follow-up Questionnaire Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #1</td>
<td>13 (matrix question with 35 sub-questions), 15, 16</td>
<td>6 -- 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12 -- 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>15 -- 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Questions</td>
<td>1 -- 12</td>
<td>1 -- 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedures**

This section discusses the procedures of this research study. It specifically addresses how this study’s initial survey and follow-up questionnaire data was gathered, retrieved, stored, and analyzed. Figure 5 below illustrates the procedures in this study.
Figure 5. Procedures for Research Study.

Once the survey instrument was finalized, the survey was administered to the sample. Seventy-eight online learning leaders associated with the TTEG were emailed a pre-notification (see Appendix H). The pre-notification email informed prospective participants of the nature and purpose of the study, provided an estimate of how long it would take to complete the survey, and when the survey would be closed to responses.

The 78 potential participants were sent an invitation to complete the survey via email (see Appendix I). Participants were able to access the survey via the URL link provided in the invitation email. They were able to consent to participate and complete the entire survey online.

When potential participants visited the first online page of the survey, it briefly described the survey, disclosed the time required to complete the survey, provided directions, and asked them to consent to participate by clicking to the next page (Crawford, Couper, & Lamias, 2001). No passwords were used because Internet surveys requiring passwords have
been found to create a barrier that decreases response rates (Crawford, Couper, & Lamias, 2001). As no personally identifiable information was required for this research, participants completed the survey confidentially.

Five days after the first invitation was emailed, participants were sent an email reminder to complete the survey. Crawford, Couper, and Lamias (2001) found that emailing a reminder after five days was more effective than sending a reminder after two days.

The survey closed eight days after the initial invitation was sent. In an Internet survey, response rates can be as low as 10% or as high as 75% (Couper, 2001; Fowler, 1993; Robson, 2011). For this study, the Internet survey had a response rate of 31%. Seventy-eight Directors of Online Learning (or associated titles) were invited; 24 Directors of Online Learning (or associated titles) chose to participate in the initial quantitative survey.

Once participants completed the survey, the data was protected using the following procedures (Coulehan & Wells, 2006; Kramer et al., 2004; Straub, 2004): first, the data was protected inside an online, password-protected account on Survey Gizmo. Second, when the survey data was downloaded, it was used and stored only on a password-protected computer on a password-protected wireless network (Coulehan & Wells, 2006; Kramer et. al., 2004).

**Survey Data Analysis**

The researcher primarily used descriptive statistical analysis to examine the collected survey data gathered from the 24 participants. The downloaded data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software. First, the data was analyzed visually through frequencies (pie charts and stem and leaf displays) and percentages. Second, the data was analyzed through measures of
central tendency (mean, median, mode, and standard deviation). Third, the data was analyzed through correlations and measures of association (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). Based on the nature of the survey questions, descriptive analysis procedures were appropriate for this study. These analyses helped explain the quantitative information gathered from the survey and provided a meaningful interpretation of the data collected (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013; Robson, 2011).

Prior to conducting the follow-up phase of this study, the survey data was examined and analyzed. Once survey data analysis was complete, this study proceeded as originally planned and attempted to collect qualitative data via an online focus group interview. The focus group interview protocol was pilot tested. Pilot test participants indicated 100% agreement on the focus group Interview questions having a clear purpose, clear directions, clear choices, and being of appropriate length to complete.

**Follow-up Questionnaire Data Collection**

Due to issues mentioned above related to the follow-up focus group participants, a follow-up Internet questionnaire was administered to those who volunteered on the initial survey. The twelve volunteers from the initial survey’s participants were emailed an invitation with the URL to the questionnaire on SurveyGizmo. The email also included a summary report of the analyzed survey data and a list of the means from the 35 items in survey question #13 in descending order. The 12 follow-up volunteers were emailed a reminder five days after the email invitation. The follow-up Internet questionnaire closed after seven days. Ten of the twelve volunteers viewed the questionnaire. Of the twelve volunteers, four partially completed
and three fully completed the follow-up questionnaire. Partial responses were not included in this study’s findings because they only provided background data, did not answer any content related questions, and were incomplete questionnaires. The three volunteer participants who fully completed the questionnaire provided the follow-up data included in this study.

**Follow-up Internet Questionnaire Data Analysis**

Analysis of the follow-up Internet questionnaire consisted of five steps: preparing the data for analysis, exploring the data, analyzing the data, representing the data, and interpreting the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The first step was preparing the follow-up data for analysis. Once the Internet questionnaire from the volunteers was complete, the researcher collected data into pdf summary reports for each individual reply. Then, all of the data for each question was placed into an overall report. The second step for analyzing the follow-up information was exploring the data. In this step, the researcher read through and reflected on the data, taking additional notes as necessary, and began making initial notes on possible categories.

The third step taken was to analyze the data. Data was coded using MaxQDA software. MaxQDA software allows for easy importing and editing of text data, flexible and powerful coding options, ability to add memos and notes easily, ability to integrate quantitative data from mixed methods research, and a wide array of visual tools to aid analysis (MaxQDA, 2014). Once the data was entered into the software, the researcher began the coding and categorizing process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). During the process, the researcher assigned labels to category based on exact words used by the participants. Once the data was coded, it was
grouped into appropriate themes. Then, each the category and theme was analyzed for patterns and trends.

The fourth step for analyzing the follow-up Internet questionnaire data was to represent the data. The researcher strove to represent any themes from the discussion in appropriate visual models, figures, and/or tables. The fifth step in analyzing the follow-up data was to interpret the results.

**Interpretation**

Data collected from the initial survey administration and Internet questionnaire administered to follow-up volunteers was interpreted. While the information provided from the follow-up participants was insightful and did help explain the initial survey’s results, the follow-up questionnaire data was not factored into this study’s conclusions. The follow-up questionnaire lacked enough responses to be conclusive. This study’s primary research findings and conclusions were drawn solely from the initial survey results. The insights and non-conclusive findings from the follow-up questionnaire are reported briefly and discussed separately in the following chapters. Findings from the follow-up data are shared merely for the additional insights they provide for future research.

**Summary**

This study aimed at identifying standards of quality in Christian online theological education. To discover these standards, this research study followed a non-experimental,
descriptive survey research design. The study surveyed the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

The research questions explored in this study were:

- What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?
- To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?
- What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?

Data was gathered from the TTEG of the ATS. Seventy-eight persons with Director of Online Learning status (or a closely related title) from the TTEG were invited to participate in the survey. Based on their level of experience and professional involvement in Christian online theological education, it was decided that sampling this group of experts would provide the best data possible for answering this study’s research questions.

A survey was the initial instrument used in this study. It was created after a thorough literature review of Christian theological education, online learning in Christian theological education, and standards of quality in higher education. The survey consisted of sixteen
questions with one 35-part table-matrix question. The survey utilized a pilot test and focus group review to ensure its validity and reliability.

A follow-up questionnaire was the second instrument used in this study. Due to various complications (e.g., unable to schedule a common meeting time, Christmas holiday’s approaching, end of fall semester), the originally planned focus group interview could not be conducted. Participant volunteers asked if they could complete a follow-up Internet questionnaire instead of the online, virtual focus group. The researcher consented to the change and turned the intended focus group questions into an Internet questionnaire. Follow-up data was collected from an online administration of the questionnaire.

As to the procedures followed in this study, the initial survey was administered to the sample via the Internet. All gathered data was securely stored and analyzed using descriptive statistical measures. After the initial survey data was collected and analyzed, an online focus group interview conducted via virtual conferencing software was intended. However, it was necessary to conduct use a follow-up Internet questionnaire among the volunteers instead. Of the twelve follow-up volunteers, four partially completed the Internet questionnaire and three fully completed it. Only data from the three fully completed questionnaires was analyzed.

Once both sets of data had been collected and analyzed, the results were interpreted. This study’s primary findings and conclusions came only from the interpreted initial survey data. Findings from the limited follow-up data are shared are non-conclusive, as they lack the necessary research breadth, and are shared merely for the additional insights they provide for future research.
CHAPTER FOUR:

FINDINGS

This study aimed at discovering standards of quality in Christian online theological education. As described in Chapter 3, this study sampled an expert group -- Directors of Online Learning (or closely associated job titles) from the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accreditation agency. This study began initially as an explanatory, sequential mixed methods study, but over the course of the follow-up stage had to be adapted to a survey research method (see Chapter 3 for more details). Initial quantitative data was collected via an Internet survey (see Appendix G). Seventy-eight Directors from the expert group were emailed an invitation to participate in the Internet survey. Twenty-four of the 78 (31%) completed the survey and follow-up data was collected from volunteer participants who completed the survey. The last question on the initial Internet survey asked for volunteers to participate in a follow-up online focus group. Twelve volunteers from the survey agreed to participate. Follow-up data was collected from the volunteer participants via an Internet questionnaire (see Appendix K).

All data were collected and analyzed to answer this study’s research questions. The three key research questions regarding standards of quality in Christian online theological education were:
1. What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?

2. To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?

3. What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?

This chapter presents the findings from this study. Background data summarizing the demographics and characteristics of the study's participants, will be presented first. Then, the remainder of this chapter reports the findings on each research question. For every research question, primary research findings will be presented first and additional insights will be shared second. Primary findings for this study were derived only from the initial survey, as it alone had the necessary research validity.

Additional non-conclusive insights were developed from a limited follow-up Internet questionnaire. Even though these additional insights lack the validity of response needed to be more conclusive, they provide useful information regarding a field which is vastly under researched. Therefore, the researcher chose to include the non-conclusive results to assist in the identification of future research topics and questions.
The primary findings from the initial survey data informed the conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future study presented in Chapter 5. Non-conclusive insights from the limited follow-up survey data influenced several suggestions for further research presented in Chapter 5.

**Background**

Background data was collected from the survey participants. It identified the denominational affiliation, institutional characteristics, and professional profile of those who participated in this study. This section presents the background data collected from the survey participants.

**Denominational Affiliation**

This study was conducted among ATS accredited institutions. ATS spans a wide array of Christian denominations (ATS, 2013). Participants in this study identified their affiliation to one of thirteen different Christian denominations (question #1 on the survey, as seen in Appendix G). The thirteen denominations represented as well as the number of respondents for each denomination can be seen in Table 10 below.
Table 10. Denominational Affiliation of Study Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical, non-denominational</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdenominational</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Reformed Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELCA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Methodist Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n= 24

Institutional Characteristics

Four of the survey’s background questions (questions #2 -- #5) focused on the institutional characteristics of the study’s participants. The institutional characteristics identified were institutional size, percentage of students taking online classes, percent of courses offered online, and the number of total courses offered at their institution. (See Appendix G for the exact wording of each of these questions.)

Institutional Size

Participants in this study served at institutions with varying numbers of students. The mean number of students at each participant’s theological institution was 690.5 students. The mode for institutional size was 251-500 students with a median of 815 (see Figure 6).
The standard deviation was 949.1. As can be seen in Table 11, the large standard deviation is likely due to the size of three large institutions on the data. The mode of respondents was in the 251-500 students category, which is noticeably smaller than the mean of 690.5 students. Data for institutional size was skewed positively at 1.273.

Table 11. Institutional Size Indicated by Study Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-250</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251-500</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001-1500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501-2000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2501-3000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3000+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=24
Percentage of Students Taking an Online Course

Participants were asked what percentage of their institution’s students had enrolled in one or more online course(s) during the last academic year. The mean was 41.50% of students having taken one or more online course(s). Three percentages tied for mode: 20%, 30%, and 50% of students (see Figure 7). The median for percentage of students taking an online course was 43.50%. The standard deviation was 24.679 and variance was 609.036. Data for this item were skewed positively at 0.902, which means that the distribution of responses was more concentrated below 50%.

Figure 7. Percentage of Students Taking Online Classes at Participant’s Institution.*
*\(n=24\)
Percent of Courses Offered Online

This study asked what percent of courses were offered online at a participant’s institution in the last academic year. The mean was 34.21% of an institution’s courses being offered in an online format. The mode was 15% of courses offered online (see Figure 8). The median was 22.00%. The standard deviation was 29.522, and the variance for this item was 871.563, which implies a wide range in participant’s responses. Data was skewed positively at 0.787, which suggests that response distribution concentrated on 50% or less.

Figure 8. Percent of Courses Offered Online During 2013-2014 Academic Year at Participant’s Institution.*
*n=24
Number of Courses Offered Online

When participants were asked how many courses their institution offers online each year, the mean was 124.67 courses. The mode and median was 30 courses (see Figure 9). The standard deviation was 401.766. Data was skewed positively at 4.809. However, when the three outliers -- institutions of 3,000+ students enrolled -- were removed, the average number of courses offered each year dropped to 42.3 online courses offered per year.

![Number of Online Courses Offered](image)

**Figure 9.** Number of Online Courses Offered at Participant’s Institution.*

* n=24

Professional Profile

This study sampled Directors of Online Learning at ATS accredited schools. The following sections will report background data on the participants’ professional profile, their
reported job titles, years of online learning experience, and formal academic training. The background information is useful for putting context to the data that were gathered.

**Job Titles**

Study participants held or had held seven different job titles related to distance and online learning:

- Director of Online Learning (or Distance Education),
- Director of Related Educational Area (e.g., Director of Distributed Learning, Director of Teaching with Technology),
- Director of Technology,
- Senior Instructional Designer,
- Senior Educational Technologist,
- Dean (or Vice President) of Online Learning, and
- Provost of Distance Education or Associate Provost of Academic Administration.

Figure 10 below displays the number of participants for each job title related to online learning.
Participants reported an average of 9.46 years of experience related directly to online learning. The standard deviation was 6.684, and variance was 44.68. The distribution was skewed positively at 0.865, which suggests that the responses' distribution was concentrated toward the fewer years of experience. The mode was 3 years of experience, and the median was 8 years of experience (see Figure 11).
*n=24

**Figure 11.** Participant’s Years of Experience Related to Online Learning.

Formal Academic Training

Question #8 on the survey (see Appendix G) asked participants if they had completed formal academic training in distance and/or online learning. Fifty percent indicated they had completed formal academic training in distance or online learning, while fifty percent indicated they had not.

Question #9 on the survey (see Appendix G) asked participants who had completed formal academic training what type/level of training they had. Participants identified three different educational levels they had completed formal distance/online training in: (1) doctoral education, (2) masters education, and (3) non-degree programs (see Figure 12).
Figure 12. Participant’s Level of Formal Academic Training.*
*n=24

Question #10 asked participants to identify the institution where they received their formal academic training. Twelve of the 24 survey participants indicated they had completed some formal academic training related to online learning. As seen in Figure 13, participants named a diverse range of educational organizations or institutions that included public universities (33%), private colleges/universities (17%), for-profit (25%) and non-profit educational training organizations (25%).
Individual Demographics

Two background questions on the survey focused on the individual demographics of participants. They asked the participants’ age range and gender. The data gathered as a result follows.

Age

The mean age of participants was 41.3 with 45.8% of respondents belonging to the 35-44 age range. Both the median and mode was in the 35-44 age range (see Figure 13). The standard deviation was 0.969 with a variance of 0.940. While the mean and median suggest that most Directors of Online Learning are in their early 40’s, the large standard deviation and variance suggests that age ranges are varied. Data were skewed positively at 0.239, which
indicates that if Directors are not in the 35-44 median range, they will most likely be in the higher age ranges (i.e., 45-54, 55-64).

**Figure 14.** Participant’s Age Range.*  
* *n=24

**Gender**

58.3% of survey participants were male and 41.7% were female. Fourteen participants were male and 10 were female.
**Research Questions**

This study examined three research questions related to Christian online theological education.

1. **What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?**

2. **To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?**

3. **What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?**

Table 12 highlights how each survey question relates to the research findings. The remainder of this chapter presents findings for each respective research question.

**Table 12. Relationship between Research Questions and Research Findings.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Follow-up Internet Questionnaire Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #1</td>
<td>13 (matrix question with 35 sub-questions), 15, 16</td>
<td>6 -- 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12 -- 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>15 -- 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Questions</td>
<td>1 -- 12</td>
<td>1 -- 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question #1: Perceived Importance of Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

This study’s first research question asked, “What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?” The primary findings for research question #1 came from question #13 on the initial survey. These primary findings are reported first. Additional, non-conclusive insights gained from questions #6 -- #11 on the follow-up Internet questionnaire are presented second.

Primary Research Findings on Research Question #1

The initial survey contained 35 standards of quality identified from the literature review. This section discusses the primary research findings on research question #1. It summarizes the data on each of the 35 standards surveyed. It identifies the items that participants agree upon as quality standards for Christian online theological education.

Degree of Agreement with Standards of Quality for Christian Online Theological Education

Survey question #13 (see Appendix G) asked participants to identify how strongly they agreed with each of the 35 quality standards statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 representing Strongly Disagree and 5 representing Strongly Agree). Table 13 identifies the degree of agreement participants indicated for standards of quality for Christian online theological education. Table 13 also provides the following statistical analysis is each standard:
mean, mean rank, standard deviation, and variance. Since the purpose of this study was to identify perceived importance/agreement on standards of quality among Directors of Online Learning in Christian online theological education, these descriptive statistics helped achieve this aim. The mean identified how much agreement existed among the participants. Mean ranking indicated how a standard’s mean compares to the other standards surveyed. Standard deviation and variance revealed how unified or diverse participants’ responses were. Also, in Table 13, the standards of quality marked by an asterisk represent the items identified by this study as quality standards for Christian online theological education.
Table 13. Degree of Agreement among Christian Theological Distance Education Leaders among Standards of Quality Identified from the Literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percent Indicating Agreement</th>
<th>Mean (out of 5)</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Require instructor weekly involvement*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.75*</td>
<td>3*</td>
<td>0.442</td>
<td>0.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Require student weekly involvement*</td>
<td>95.8%*</td>
<td>4.71*</td>
<td>4* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>0.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Provide clarity on course interactions*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.96*</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>0.204</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Provide clarity for course assessments*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.92*</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0.282</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Give multiple learning interactions*</td>
<td>91.7%*</td>
<td>4.54*</td>
<td>12* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.658</td>
<td>0.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Provide specific requirements for learning interactions*</td>
<td>95.8%*</td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>19* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>0.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Apply learning to spiritual lives</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>0.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Provide timely feedback*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.54*</td>
<td>12* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Identify type of feedback students receive*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.33*</td>
<td>18*</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td>0.580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Clarify when students receive feedback*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>22* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>0.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Cover learning objectives*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.63*</td>
<td>9* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>0.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Assess learning objectives*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.46*</td>
<td>15* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.779</td>
<td>0.607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. Connect to campus resources</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>26 (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.992</td>
<td>0.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. Foster authentic learning community*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.63*</td>
<td>9* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>0.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o. Use variety of assessment methods</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>30 (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>1.116</td>
<td>1.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p. Align activities with learning objectives*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.67*</td>
<td>7* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>0.232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q. Use forward-looking assessment</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.881</td>
<td>0.775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Percent Indicating Agreement</td>
<td>Mean (out of 5)</td>
<td>Mean Ranking</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>Variance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r. Identify grading policies*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.63*</td>
<td>9* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>0.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s. Use active learning strategies*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.54*</td>
<td>12* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.658</td>
<td>0.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t. Assess media used</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>30 (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.992</td>
<td>0.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u. Encourage higher-ordered thinking*</td>
<td>95.8%*</td>
<td>4.71*</td>
<td>4* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>0.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Have a clear structure*</td>
<td>95.8%*</td>
<td>4.67*</td>
<td>7* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.565</td>
<td>0.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. Practice good web design*</td>
<td>100%*</td>
<td>4.71*</td>
<td>4* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.464</td>
<td>0.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x. Use variety of delivery methods*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>19* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.624</td>
<td>0.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y. Identify support services*</td>
<td>95.8%*</td>
<td>4.46*</td>
<td>15* (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.588</td>
<td>0.346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z. Design course by minimum standards*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>22* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa. Use technology appropriately*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>22* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.944</td>
<td>0.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bb. Have students work in groups</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1.227</td>
<td>1.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cc. Promote collaborative environment</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.779</td>
<td>0.607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dd. Separate content into modules*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>19* (tied with 2 others)</td>
<td>0.751</td>
<td>0.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ee. Vary course module length</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>26 (tied with 1 other)</td>
<td>0.741</td>
<td>0.549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ff. Design course with full-time faculty</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1.049</td>
<td>1.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gg. Design course with best expert</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1.301</td>
<td>1.694</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percent Indicating Agreement</th>
<th>Mean (out of 5)</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hh. Deliver course with full-time faculty</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1.018</td>
<td>1.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Deliver course with skilled online instructor*</td>
<td>91.6%*</td>
<td>4.38*</td>
<td>17*</td>
<td>0.770</td>
<td>0.592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=24
*The asterisk indicates an item had 90% of participants or more agree or strongly agree on the item being recognized as a quality standard and scored a mean above 4.25. Follow-up questionnaire participants also affirmed the 24 items with asterisk as quality standards.

Twenty-Four Standards of Quality Identified by Survey Participants

Once participants had completed the initial survey, the challenge for the researcher was to sift through the data, analyze it, and determine if a set of standards of quality in Christian online theological education emerged. The majority of the 35 standards listed in this study’s initial survey had large-scale representation in the literature as quality standards for online learning. Since the majority of these 35 standards of quality had wide representation in the literature, the researcher anticipated strong agreement on these items from distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education. In this study, one could argue that these distance learning professionals strongly agreed on 29 of the 35 standards, because all of these items received a 4.00 mean rating or higher (Table 13 above displays the mean ranking of the original 35 items). Alternatively, one could argue that 4.00 is merely agreement, that only the items with a mean of 4.50 (which would include 14 standards) or higher should be recognized as having a high level of agreement.

After examining the survey results, the researcher determined that 4.25 was the best indicator of agreement. The reasons the researcher chose the mean score of 4.25 or higher were:
1. They had 90% of participants indicate agreement or strong agreement;
2. They had over 35% of participants indicate strong agreement;
3. Using a 4.0 score seemed too inclusive (which would have identified 29 standards); and
4. Using a 4.5 score seemed too restrictive (which would have only identified 14 standards).

With the above criteria established, this study identified the 24 standards of quality for Christian online theological education included below in Table 14.
Table 14. Twenty-four Standards of Quality Identified on the Survey for Christian Online Theological Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online courses should...</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. Provide clarity on course interactions.</td>
<td>4.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Provide clarity for course assessments</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Require instructor weekly involvement</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u. Encourage higher-ordered thinking</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. Practice good web design</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Require student weekly involvement</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Have a clear structure</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p. Align activities with learning objectives</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r. Identify grading policies</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Cover learning objectives</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. Foster authentic learning community</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s. Use active learning strategies</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Provide timely feedback</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Give multiple learning interactions</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Assess learning objectives</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y. Identify support services</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Deliver course with skilled online instructor</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Identify type of feedback students receive</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x. Use variety of delivery methods</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Provide specific requirements for learning interactions</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dd. Separate content into modules</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Clarify when students receive feedback</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa. Use technology appropriately</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z. Design course by minimum standards</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=24

Additional, Non-Conclusive, Follow-up Findings on Research Question #1

The initial survey data identified 24 quality standards for Christian online theological education. However, the follow-up questionnaire data were intended to elaborate further on these quality standards by: (1) evaluating the 24 quality standards identified; (2) describing what participants understood quality standards to mean; (3) examining which of the 10 additional standards added from question #14 on the initial survey (see Appendix G) should be
identified as quality standards; (4) discerning which quality standards where the most important; and (5) exploring whether some quality standards were more weighty, vital, or valuable than others. While the follow-up data received lacked enough responses to be conclusive, insights from it are informative, useful to the field, and presented below.

Examining the 24 Standards of Quality Identified

The follow-up questionnaire participants were asked if it would be appropriate to include the top 24 items -- the ones with average means of 4.25 or higher -- as quality standards for Christian online theological education (see question #7 in Appendix K). After answering this question, they were asked to describe why they answered yes or no. The data gathered was limited, but the participants all agreed that it was appropriate to include these top 24 items as standards of quality for Christian online theological education. When asked to explain their reasoning, all the participants provided similar responses. They highlighted how these top 24 standards have “strength of agreement,” “represent a solid list of exemplary practices,” and “align with accepted best practices for online education.”

Question #11 on the follow-up questionnaire asked participants how well the survey’s results reflected their experience and understanding of quality in online learning (see Appendix K). Follow-up participants all agreed that this survey’s results (the 24 quality standards identified) adequately reflected their perception of quality online learning in Christian theological education.
Describing an Understanding of Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

Before analyzing the initial survey data on quality standards with follow-up participants, the goal was to discern what the concept of “standards of quality” meant to distance learning professionals in Christian theological education. Question #6 of the follow-up Internet questionnaire (Appendix K) explored their understanding. The numerical breadth of responses received was limited, but the follow-up participants indicated that standards of quality in Christian online theological education were “the same standards as any online education” except with more emphasis on: (1) spiritual formation, (2) group dynamics, and (3) highly involved communication between professor and students. Follow-up participants also highlighted how quality standards encourage proactive communication, streamlined processes, assessment and evaluation, and cohesion among the courses offered.

While follow-up questionnaire participants saw vast similarities to standards of quality used more broadly in higher education, they noted that some unique characteristics exist within Christian online theological education. They indicated that standards of quality in Christian online theological education should: (1) emphasize “spiritual formation” as a goal; (2) indicate how “group dynamics” and “high, proactive communication” are necessary to achieving spiritual formation online; and (3) focus both course teaching and assessment methods on forming the spiritual formation. The common understanding among follow-up participants was that quality standards in Christian online theological education are very similar to standards of quality for online learning in higher education but differ in two key aspects:

153
1. Standards of quality in Christian online theological education will focus on achieving the unique focus, aims, and goals of Christian theological education.

2. Standards of quality in Christian online theological education will utilize certain pedagogical methods over others to achieve Christian theological education’s unique goals.


**Examining the 10 Additional Standards Listed for Consideration**

The 35 standards/items listed in question #13 on the initial survey were never meant to be exhaustive; instead, they were intended to be representative of the literature. With this intention in mind, survey question #15 asked participants to identify any additional items for possible inclusion as quality standards. Eleven of the 24 survey participants listed items. Collectively, they contributed 21 additional standards for consideration. Of the 21 items added by the participants, 14 of the 21 responses were unique and not covered already by question 13’s items. Of the 14 unique write-in responses, four were duplicates, which left ten non-repetitive standards identified by participants. Table 15 displays the ten additional standards of quality added by participants and also lists the number of participants who indicated each standard.
Table 15. Ten Additional Quality Standards Listed for Consideration by Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard of Quality</th>
<th>Number of Participants Who Listed Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online course should include live, synchronous teaching to accomplish spiritual formation.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should have clear audio and video.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should include course introductions.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should accomplish mission of the institution.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should be academic equivalent to on-campus learning.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should include student-to-God interaction.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should encourage a student’s fidelity.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should be designed to develop a student’s faith integration as they learn.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should lead to student satisfaction.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses should contain current instructional materials.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=24

The 10 additional standards identified through survey question #15 were provided to follow-up questionnaire participants. Question #8 on the follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix K) asked, “Of the 10 items listed by participants, which standards should be added to a list of quality standards for Christian online theological education?” Seven of the 10 standards received confirming feedback from the follow-up questionnaire participants. They claimed these seven items should be included as quality standards (see Table 16).
Table 16. Seven Additional Quality Standards Indicated for Inclusion by the Follow-up Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online courses should...</th>
<th>Number of Participants Who Listed Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help accomplish mission of the institution.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be designed to develop a student’s faith</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integration as they learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contain current instructional materials.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include live, synchronous teaching to accomplish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spiritual formation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include student-to-God interaction.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be the academic equivalent to on-campus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include course introductions.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=3

Discerning the Most Important Quality Standards

The limited, follow-up data also suggest that not all standards carry equal weight or have the same level of importance for distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education. Follow-up questionnaire participants were asked to select their top five standards from the 24 items identified by the survey (see question #9 in Appendix K). They were not asked to list their top five in rank order, just to select their top five standards. Collectively, the follow-up questionnaire participants selected ten of the 24 identified standards as being the most important (see Table 17 below).
Table 17. Top 10 Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education as Indicated by Follow-Up Questionnaire Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online courses should…</th>
<th>Number of Participants Who Listed Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Require instructor weekly involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Require student weekly involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Assess learning objectives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Be designed to develop a student’s faith integration.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Provide clarity for course assessments</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. Foster authentic learning community</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s. Use active learning strategies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z. Design course by minimum standards</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Include live, synchronous teaching to accomplish spiritual formation.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Help accomplish the mission of the institution.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates a quality standard added by survey participants on survey question #14.

n = 3

Of the reported top ten standards of quality in Christian online theological education, the follow-up questionnaire participants indicated the strongest agreement on the following four standards:

1. Require consistent weekly involvement of instructors (item a in Appendix L).
2. Require consistent weekly involvement of students (item b in Appendix L).
3. Assess learning objectives (item l in Appendix L).
4. Designing the course to develop a student’s faith integration (write-in standard added by participants).
Exploring if All Standards of Quality Have the Same Value/Level of Importance

Even though limited, the follow-up questionnaire participants suggested that not all standards of quality may be of equal value/importance. The follow-up participants reported varying levels of agreement on which standards, of the 24 identified, were the most important. Table 18 identifies their level of agreement on the top quality standards for Christian online theological education. Among the top ten quality standards, follow-up questionnaire participants had unanimous agreement on four standards (Level 1), had partial agreement on six standards (Level 2), and recognized the other 21 standards as necessary marks of quality (Level 3) but did not list any of them as top standards. The follow-up participants’ responses suggest that varying levels and degree of standards could potentially exist within Christian online theological education.
**Table 18. Levels of Agreement on Top Quality Standards for Christian Online Theological Education.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online courses should...</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1: Unanimous Identification at a Top Standard</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Require instructor weekly involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Require student weekly involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. Foster authentic learning community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Assess learning objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2: Partial Identification as a Top Standard</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Provide clarity for course assessments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s. Use active learning strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z. Design course by minimum standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help accomplish the mission of the institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Include live, synchronous teaching to accomplish spiritual formation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Be designed to develop a student’s faith integration as they learn</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 3: No Identification as a Top Standard</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cc. Provide clarity on course interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u. Encourage higher-ordered thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. Practice good web design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Have a clear structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p. Align activities with learning objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r. Identify grading policies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Cover learning objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Provide timely feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Give multiple learning interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y. Identify support services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Deliver course with skilled online instructor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Identify type of feedback students receive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x. Use variety of delivery methods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Provide specific requirements for interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dd. Separate content into modules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Clarify when students receive feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa. Use technology appropriately</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contain current instructional materials</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Include student-to-God interaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Be academic equivalent to on-campus learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Include course introductions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For full description of quality standard, see Appendix L.
** Indicates a quality standard added by survey participants on survey question #14.
Research Question #2: Perceptions Related to Implementing Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

In addition to identifying distance learning professionals’ perception of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, this study also examined these leaders’ perceptions about implementing these standards. This study’s second research question asked, “To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?” The primary findings for research question #2 came from question #14 on the initial survey. These primary finding are presented first. Additional, non-conclusive insights gained from questions #12 -- #14 on the follow-up Internet questionnaire are presented afterward.

Primary Research Findings on Research Question #2

On question #14 in the initial survey, participants were asked how strongly they agree with the statement: “In light of my previous answers and my ideals for online learning, I feel that my institution’s online courses/program exemplify “standards of quality” in online theological education.” In reply to this statement, participants produced a 3.8 mean out of 5. The mode of replies was in the “agree” selection (4.0), with 67% of participants selecting this option. Seventy-five percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.
Additional, Non-Conclusive, Follow-up Findings on Research Question #2

The survey data provide some initial perspective on distance learning professionals’ beliefs about implementing quality standards in Christian online learning. However, the follow-up questionnaire data was intended to elaborate further on initial survey’s findings. While the follow-up data received lack enough breadth to be conclusive, it is informative for the field and presented below.

Perceptions of Other Christian Theological Distance Learning Professionals

The follow-up questionnaire asked the participants two questions about survey question #14’s results -- 76% of participants indicating agreement on achieving their ideals regarding quality standards in Christian online theological education. The first question, item #12 on the follow-up Internet questionnaire, asked participants: “the average response to survey question #14 was 3.8 out of 5; do you believe that most Christian online theological education programs would ‘agree’ that they are achieving their ideals of quality?”

The follow-up questionnaire participants indicated that most distance learning professionals in Christian online learning believe they are achieving quality standards. Follow-up participants believed the 3.8 mean of 5 (or 76% agreement) was an accurate reflection of the beliefs of all Christian distance learning professionals. However, these professionals may be, as one participant noted, merely “maintaining the status quo” without genuinely “understanding real measures of quality.”

Follow-up participants mainly identified ATS and accreditation agencies as the primary reason online programs in Christian online theological education have or maintain any
standards of quality. While the participants in the follow-up questionnaire believed most
leaders would “agree to achieving standards of quality,” they claimed that most distance
learning leaders in Christian theological education may not really know what quality is or
understand what they were saying yes to. The follow-up participants suggested that most
Christian distance learning professionals likely perceive accreditation requirements as quality
standards for online learning.

It was clear from the follow-up questionnaire participant’s results that they did not have
much confidence in their colleagues’ understanding of quality standards. They also indicated
that all distance learning professionals would sense the quality of their online learning
programs have room for improvement.

Perceptions about Other Christian Theological Distance Learning Professionals

Achieving Standards of Quality

Follow-up Internet questionnaire item #13 focused on participant’s perceptions of other
distance learning professionals in Christian theological education. The follow-up participants
were asked, “Out of all the Christian online theological education programs, do you believe that
76% of Christian online programs practice standards of quality?” They were also asked to
explain their answer.

The follow-up questionnaire participants seemed divided on their opinion of other
Christian theological distance learning professionals achieving quality standards in online
learning. They did not fully agree that 76% of Christian online theological education programs
were achieving standards of quality. However, they did agree that their colleagues were
practicing some version of quality, whatever it may be. One participant was more optimistic. This participant claimed, “I believe that 100% practice standards of quality, but that not all 100% of them practice all of them [standards of quality] or practice them at the same level of quality.” However, the follow-up participants generally felt that their colleagues only partially practiced quality standards. While the follow-up questionnaire participants seemed united in their belief that even though distance learning professionals were practicing something that may resemble quality standards, not all of them were practicing quality standards to the same degree or level of quality.

**Perceptions of Participant’s toward Their Own Online Learning Program**

Having already questioned participants on their perceptions about other Christian distance learning professionals, follow-up Internet questionnaire item #14 asked participants about their own online learning programs. Follow-up questionnaire item #14 asked participants to “describe how well you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey’s results.”

The participants in the follow-up questionnaire claimed they were achieving standards of quality in online learning only moderately well. They stated they had implemented some quality standards in their online programs. However, implementation of quality standards appeared to be more sporadic than systematic due to the lack of “full faculty adoption” of best online teaching practices, “lack of agreed upon standards” within Christian online learning, lack of resources “to review and evaluate,” and a variety of other related factors.
On examination of data for research question #2 (and in follow-up Internet questionnaire item #14 in particular), the follow-up participants seemed united in their belief that standards of quality can achieve and mean two different things. On one hand, accreditation agencies help achieve a minimum level of standards of quality that ensures basic, effective online education. On the other hand, a more robust set of quality standards for online learning are needed that embody higher ideals of quality for online learning. The lack of agreed upon standards was identified clearly as one factor that hindered institution-wide understanding of quality in online learning. The follow-up participants also appeared united in believing that ideal standards of quality can only be achieved partially. They suggested that achieving 76% of one’s ideals in online learning may actually be high quality online learning.

**Research Question #3: Issues of Implementing Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education**

In addition to identifying Christian distance learning professionals’ perceptions of standards of quality in online learning and discovering their beliefs about implementing those standards, this study also explored issues they encountered when implementing standards of quality. This study’s research question #3 asked, “What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?”
Primary Research Findings

This study intended to collect enough data from the volunteer follow-up participants to present well-rounded research findings for research question #3. However, the follow-up data collected lacked enough research validity to be considered as primary findings. As a result, this study only provides the additional, non-conclusive, follow-up findings for research question #3. While not comprehensive enough to be conclusive, these follow-up findings are informative, collected thoughts from Christian distance learning professionals. They identify several important issues related to implementing quality standards in Christian online theological education.

Additional, Non-Conclusive, Follow-Up Findings on Research Question #3

As noted on Table 7 in Chapter 3, the original research method intended for the focus group interview to answer research question #3. Due to the adjustments required during the administration of this study, which are also noted in Chapter 3 (see Table 8 and Table 9), follow-up data had to be collected from a follow-up Internet questionnaire. The follow-up Internet questionnaire items #15 - #17 gathered data to answer research question #3. The additional, non-conclusive, follow-up findings that emerged from the collected data are presented below.

Seven Successes Encountered When Implementing Standards

In follow-up Internet questionnaire item #15, participants identified strengths or successes related to implementing standards of quality. Participants did not elaborate extensively on their responses, but they did provide a list of seven strengths or successes. Each
item listed below was mentioned one time by a participant; there were no duplicates. The following list identifies seven strengths (or successes) one might encounter when implementing standards of quality in Christian online theological education:

- Enrollment growth,
- Higher student satisfaction,
- Improved retention rates,
- Increased opportunities for faculty development,
- Better instructional content development,
- Improved community interaction, and
- Higher quality, overall academic programs.

**Seven Challenges Encountered When Implementing Standards**

Follow-up Internet questionnaire item #16 asked about the challenges of implementing standards of quality in Christian online learning. Again, participants did not elaborate much on their responses, but they did produce a list of seven challenges. Each item listed below was mentioned once by a participant; there were no duplicates. The following list identifies seven challenges one might encounter when implementing standards of quality in Christian online theological education:

- Human resource (staffing) needs,
- Faculty development,
- Online content/course development,
- Community interaction,
- Program evaluation and assessment,
- Reputation of online learning in Christian education, and
- Ability to make systematic improvements.

Some of the participants’ responses on challenges were intentionally the same as the previous question regarding strengths/successes. Four items -- faculty development; online content development; community interaction; and higher quality academic programs/systematic improvements -- were listed in both questions. With these four items being listed as both strengths and challenges, it may demonstrate that certain issues have a double-sided nature. Certain issues, like the four mentioned above, may be either an area of success or an area of challenge. These issues can potentially turn in either direction for distance learning professionals involved in Christian theological education.

**Additional Thoughts from Follow-up Participants on Implementing Quality Standards**

Follow-up Internet questionnaire item #17 asked participants for concluding thoughts about implementing standards of quality in Christian online theological education. The information follow-up participants shared is summarized below.

The participants in the follow-up questionnaire shared four key additional thoughts on implementing quality standards. First, the follow-up participants highlighted the need for common, accepted standards of quality for Christian online theological education. They indicated that either at the ATS level or through some independent educational organization ideal standards of quality are needed. Second, the follow-up participants stated that faculty “set the tone” for standards of quality for online courses. One participant stated that “the
faculty member responsible for the [online] class sets the tone for it.” Whether or not faculty engage students and are actively involved in their online course(s) appears to determine if standards of quality can be achieved.

Third, the follow-up participants highlighted the diametric challenge of faculty development. One response indicated how Faculty need to be trained well, but also acknowledged that Faculty often do not pursue training. The consensus from the follow-up participants suggested that Faculty desperately need to be involved in an active, professional education community focused on teaching and learning. However, they also indicated that Faculty often do not participate in faculty development enough to build such a community. They also stated that Faculty do not engage with faculty development enough to adequately understand online learning’s place within the big picture goals at their institution.

Fourth, the follow-up participants suggested the need for both course-level and program-level standards of quality. One participant indicated that at the course-level, faculty and course designers need to work together to achieve quality standards for students. Another participant highlighted how big picture program-level (macro-level) quality standards need to be established in addition to individual, course-level (micro-level) standards of quality.

**Summary**

This study aimed to discover the perceptions of standards of quality in online learning by distance learning professionals within Christian online theological education. After conducting an initial survey among these professionals, 24 standards were identified with a mean of 4.25 or higher (on a scale of 5) and 10 additional standards were listed for possible
consideration. While the follow-up data lacked enough responses to be conclusive, follow-up participants affirmed the identification of 24 standards from the initial survey. They also affirmed adding seven of the 10 additional standards to the list of recognized standards of quality for Christian online theological education.

A second aim of this study was to discover if distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceived they were achieving their ideals of quality in their online learning programs. Quantitative findings from the initial survey revealed that approximately 76% agreed that they were achieving their ideals. Their answers on the survey scored a mean of 3.8 on a scale of 5.

While follow-up data lacked enough research validity to be conclusive, follow-up participants provided additional information on this study’s second research question. The follow-up participants were asked to elaborate further on whether they believe 76% of distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education were implementing quality standards. The follow-up participants suggested their colleagues may or may not truly understand what achieving ideas of quality actually means. Participants claimed that many distance leaders may only think of standards in relation to the minimum requirements of ATS or other accreditation agencies. They stated that their colleagues may assume that meeting those minimums achieves quality online learning. The follow-up participants agreed that varying degrees (or levels) of achieving one’s ideals of online learning exists. They suggested that the actual practice of quality standards varies from program to program, from course to course, and from faculty to faculty.
A third aim of this study was to discover issues that distance learning professionals encounter when trying to implement quality standards in Christian online theological education. Findings on this research question were heavily reliant on the limited follow-up data received. While follow-up data lacked enough numerical validity to be conclusive, follow-up participants did provide some helpful insights on issues they encounter. Participants identified seven strengths/successes as well as seven challenges that one might encounter when implementing quality standards in Christian online theological education. Four of the issues indicated were also in the list of strengths, suggesting that several issues can be either a success, a challenge, or both.
CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION

Theological educational institutions are professional schools with a purpose. They exist not merely to develop people with a certain set of knowledge, but also to create a certain kind of person. Distance and online learning programs at theological institutions serve this multifaceted aim through technologically-enabled delivery systems. With various intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral dimensions involved in theological education’s purpose, as well as a shifting student population that needs flexible distance learning options, the importance of quality online learning in Christian theological education cannot be understated. As its role continues to expand, online learning (and other blended forms that utilize it) in theological education needs quality standards.

Even though online learning’s growth continues, its emergence in Christian theological education raises questions. What is quality online theological education? How can it be done well? What does quality even mean in theological education, let alone online theological education? What issues and challenges will one face when trying to deliver Christian online theological education well? The purpose of this study was to address these types of questions.

The aim of this research was to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Three research questions guided this study:
1. What do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education perceive as the importance of recommended standards of quality online learning which have been identified in the literature?

2. To what degree do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in online learning?

3. What challenges, issues, and successes do distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education recognize in implementing the standards of quality for Christian online theological education which have been identified by this survey?

To answer these research questions, this study was planned originally as an explanatory, sequential mixed methods research approach. However, in response to circumstances related to the follow-up participants, the research method was adapted to a descriptive survey research design (which is detailed in Chapter 3). This study was conducted among a purposeful, expert sample of distance learning professionals – Directors of Online Learning (or associated job titles) who belong to Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

Conclusions

This research study and its findings generated two major conclusions and produced seven major themes on standards of quality in Christian online theological education. These conclusions and themes are presented below.
Twenty-four Standards of Quality Identified for Christian Online Theological Education

The study used the input of the participants to identify 24 standards of quality for Christian online theological education. These 24 quality standards are listed on Table 14 in Chapter 4. The twenty-four standards of quality identified had: (1) a mean score of 4.25 or higher; (2) 90% of participants or more indicate agreement or strong agreement as a quality standard; and (3) 35% or more indicate strong agreement. While follow-up data lacked enough responses to be conclusive, follow-up participants also agreed that these 24 standards should be quality standards used in Christian online theological education.

Additional Standards of Quality Exist within Christian Online Theological Education

The list of quality standards produced from this study is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be. While this study identified a research-based list of 24 quality standards, more likely exist within Christian online theological education: a survey of higher education literature on the topic certainly reveals the existence of more. The literature review in Chapter 2 above generated approximately 230 potential standards. The initial survey used in this study focused on 35 representative items and resulted in identifying 24 of them as quality standards. On the initial survey, participants listed 10 additional write-in standards for possible inclusion as quality standards. If follow-up responses had been more robust and been included, this study would likely have produced more than 24 standards of quality.

While more than 24 quality standards likely exist, this study’s findings are a first step for recognizing standards of quality within Christian online theological education. At least 24 standards of quality now have some common agreement among Christian distance learning
professionals and can serve as a starting point. Christian theological distance learning professionals can build upon these 24 quality standards, conduct further research on the 10 additional standards they suggested for possible inclusion as quality standards, and expand the field of knowledge.

Themes for Christian Online Theological Education from the Identified Standards of Quality

While this study’s results on standards of quality can assist Christian online learning leaders in various ways, it may also be helpful to recognize the general themes that emerged from this study. From the 24 standards of quality identified and the 10 listed for possible inclusion, seven themes emerged that can inform Christian online theological education. These seven themes suggest that Christian online theological education should:

1. Provide clear directions,
2. Require consistent involvement from instructor and students,
3. Aim at learning goals and objectives,
4. Practice clear instructional design,
5. Use various forms of learning interactions,
6. Develop critical and creative thinking skills, and
7. Encourage spiritual development.

Each of these seven themes is discussed in more detail below.
Provide Clear Directions

One theme to emerge from this study is that Christian online learning should provide clear directions. From the survey responses, 10 of the 24 quality standards identified -- c, d, w, v, r, y, l, i, f, and j (see Appendix L for item descriptions) -- relate to the need for clear directions in online courses. The need for clear directions in online learning also corresponds with a general characteristic of good pedagogy that encourages clear communication between students and faculty to achieve course expectations (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1997; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Many problems in online courses occur merely because they lack clear directions. The transactional distance between students and faculty creates a dependency gap where student's only guidance during a learning activity often rests in the directions they have been provided. Providing students with clear directions in their online courses, in and of itself, can help enhance the quality of an online course.

Require Consistent Involvement from Instructors and Students

A second theme to highlight from this study is that Christian online learning should require consistent involvement from both instructor and students. From the survey responses, item a and item b specifically indicate the importance of active, weekly involvement from students and instructors as well as related items n, ii, f, and j (see Appendix L for item descriptions). From the list of additional standards to consider for inclusion, participants highlighted the need for live, online synchronous class sessions. Listing live, online synchronous sessions suggests that both instructors and students in theological education desire more interaction with one another in online learning.
Various literature in both higher education and Christian theological education highlights the need for weekly involvement from both instructor and students. Various online learning researchers have argued that on-going, active involvement in the online course is central to online learning and encourages high-quality human interaction and social presence within an online course (Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 2007a; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Sherry, 2003).

For theological education to achieve its purpose, high-levels of human involvement may be, arguably, even more vital than in higher education. Theological education is embedded with socio-spiritual biases that view relational connections as an integral part of theological pedagogy (Hess, 2005; S. Lowe, 2010). With such strong educational philosophies within it – theologically informed as they may be – one might assume Christian online theological education would strongly emphasize relational interactions. One might also assume that instructors would actively use technology to maintain steady, ongoing connections with their students. Yet the very dynamic desired by theological educators may be the least practiced by instructors. Theological instructors may critique online learning for being impersonal when they may be the primary reason it lacks the desired socio-spiritual dynamic, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. For distance learning professionals in Christian theological education aiming for quality, implementing course elements that require regular and consistent involvement among instructors and students can help them achieve that goal.
Aim at Learning Goals and Objectives

Aiming at learning goals and objectives in Christian online learning was the third theme discovered in this research study. Educators can easily overlook learning goals and objectives or assume they are naturally achieving them. Yet, a course may or may not be achieving its intended aim. Participants in the survey indicated the larger theme of aiming at learning goals in items u, p, k, l, and ii (see Appendix L for item descriptions). The additional standards listed for possible inclusion also indicated that an online course should serve the school’s mission and provide an equivalent (or better) education than its on-campus counterpart. In higher education, aiming at course goals and objectives is a foundational principle of effective course design (Fink, 2002). In theological education, ATS works to ensure a school’s course curriculum serves the institution’s overall mission (ATS, 2012). However, the primary catalysts for producing quality online learning are the educators directly involved in it. Distance learning professionals in Christian theological education can help promote quality in online learning by ensuring their online courses serve the appropriate learning goals and objectives.

Practice Clear Instructional Design

A fourth theme to highlight is the need to practice clear instructional design in Christian online learning. Of all themes discovered from this study, the need for clear instructional design had the most related items. From the survey data, 17 of the 24 identified standards of quality suggested the need for good instructional design (items w, v, p, r, k, n, s, e, l, y, l, x, f, dd, j, aa, and z; see Appendix L for item descriptions). From the literature in higher education to the items included in the initial survey, much emphasis focuses on utilizing effective online
instructional design (Ascough, 2002; Fink, 2002; Keeton, 2004; Ko, 2005; Moore, 2011; Quality Matters, 2011; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Quality Matters, 2011). When a course does not meet standards of quality, the course usually, at some level, is lacking in effective online instructional design. Practicing clear instructional design prepares an online course to be a quality learning experience for students. When effective online instructional design is combined with effective online delivery, quality online learning is the result. Distance learning professionals can encourage educational quality and online learning effectiveness by utilizing best practices in online instructional design.

**Use Various Forms of Learning Interactions**

To create an effective online learning experience, good online course design is not enough. Effective online instructional design must be combined with effective online delivery. This related paring highlights a fifth theme that emerged from this study – the need for using various types of learning interactions. Learning is not merely acquiring information. Learning is not merely downloading information from the instructor’s head into the heads of students. Online learning should not bypass characteristics of good pedagogy because it is technologically-mediated or believes that technology inherently promotes interaction. Merely reading information or listening to video lectures does not produce the interaction required to create quality online learning experiences. In this study, 10 of the 24 quality standards emphasized the need for various forms of learning interactions – items a, b, n, h, e, ii, l, x, f, and j (see Appendix L for item descriptions). The 10 additional standards the participants listed suggest that various faculty, student, community, and spiritual interactions are needed to
achieve quality in Christian online theological education. These findings suggest that various forms of learning interactions are vital for effective online course delivery. Faculty and students need to be engaged in various forms of learning interactions within an active, digitally-connected community in order to achieve quality online learning.

**Develop Critical and Creative Thinking**

Developing students’ critical and creative thinking skills in Christian online learning is the sixth theme from this study. It is clear from the survey data, items u (encourage higher-ordered thinking), k (cover learning objectives), and s (use active learning strategies) aim at helping students achieve more than rote memorization or basic knowledge. These items suggest that using active learning strategies will help students process information at a deeper level. These items encourage students to progress beyond a basic understanding of course content and challenge them to achieve higher levels of thinking (i.e., analysis, synthesis, evaluation). While achieving higher-ordered levels of thinking already present educators with a sizeable challenge, data from the follow-up questionnaire also highlight the need for more faith-integration to promote Christian learning, which may be considered an even deeper level of student processing and learning.

As a result of these findings, distance learning professionals in Christian theological education should aim to develop critical and creative thinking skills through online learning. In Christian theological education, developing this type of critical and creative thinking is mission-critical for achieving its purpose. Distance programs and instructional staff should aim to develop it. It must be led from the instructional-side of the educational equation. It cannot be
assumed that it will happen on its own. Promoting active, critical, and creative thinking strategies should be employed by Christian online theological educators. As distance learning professionals aim to develop critical and creative thinking, they will help their online courses and program achieve higher levels of online learning excellence.

**Encourage Spiritual Development**

The seventh theme to emerge from this study on Christian online theological education is that Christian online learning should encourage spiritual development. From the survey data, items a, b, n, e, and ii related to this theme (see Appendix L for item descriptions). Additional standards listed for possible inclusion by participants also indicated both a need for (1) student-to-God interaction and (2) faith integration into an online course’s design. That Christian theological educators would want to encourage spiritual development should not be a surprise. Christian theological education is, by definition, involved in spiritual development. As identified by ATS (2012), spiritual development and faith formation is one of the major purposes of theological education. Yet theological educators may assume that such spiritual development happens naturally through their teaching. Spiritual development in theological education does not automatically happen by dealing with sacred content, by being on a campus, or by being in the physical presence of a teacher. Faith may come through hearing, but learning comes through hearing and doing.

Spiritual growth and formation is at the core of theological education. There is no silver bullet or magical formula that produces it. Spiritual formation happens through a synthesis of factors -- seen and unseen -- that are available to students regardless of their location status.
While this is not the place to dive further into the dynamics of spiritual development, for our purposes here, aiming at spiritual development in Christian online learning is essential to achieving spiritual goals. Distance learning professionals in Christian theological education should consider making it a core, specific aim of their online learning. They should also assess it to ensure it has been promoted actively within every course. Otherwise, online theological education may be guilty of merely promoting head knowledge that lacks the larger virtues of a well-developed, holistic spiritual understanding.

**Insights from the Follow-Up Data that Need Further Study**

Though the follow-up data did not generate enough responses to be conclusive, it did produce several useful insights from experts in Christian online theological education. Even though non-conclusive, these insights merit further discussion. These potential insights are described in more detail below.

**Levels (or Degrees of Importance) among Standards of Quality**

While this study identified 24 standards of quality among distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education, the limited follow-up data suggested that not all standards of quality are of equal value. Follow-up questionnaire participants indicated that some standards may be more important (or more critical/vital) than others. It seemed there was universal agreement on some quality standards, partial agreement on others, and limited agreement on several more. This pattern of response from follow-up participants could suggest that at least three levels (or degrees of importance) exist among the identified standards of
quality (see Table 14). Distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education may benefit from exploring this possibility further and developing a hierarchy or weight/value system for their quality standards.

As they further explore the topic, Christian distance learning professionals may gain insight by examining how higher education evaluates quality standards (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001; Keeton, 2004; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Sloan Consortium, 2013; Quality Matters, 2011). For example, the Online Learning Consortium’s Quality Scorecard uses a 0 – 3 rubric-like grading scale that allows differing scores for a standard, and Quality Matters uses varying maximum scores on standards—one standard might have a maximum point value of 3, while another has a maximum point value of 1 or 2. As standards of quality are developed for Christian online theological education, distance learning professionals will likely benefit from recognizing that standards of quality can vary in their degree, value, and level of importance.

Quality -- In the Eye of the Beholder

This study found that 76% of distance learning professionals (3.8 of 5) felt they were achieving their ideals concerning standards of quality in Christian online theological education. While the primary findings revealed most online learning leaders might agree they are achieving their ideals, the limited follow-up data suggested that the meaning of quality may not be clear to Christian distance learning professionals. As in broader higher online education, standards of quality are relative to the community or person that identifies them and the person, school, community, or broader organization that ascribes to them (Chaney, 2006;
Meyer, 200; Novak, 2002; Nunan & Calvert, 1992; Sherry, 2003). Given that ATS is the primary agency implementing standards for theological education, many Christian theological distance learning professionals may think that meeting ATS requirements automatically ensures high-levels of online learning quality. The limited follow-up data suggested that these professionals may not be knowledgeable about higher ideals of quality for online learning. With only 50% of Christian theological distance learning professionals having formal academic training in distance or online learning, gaps could exist in their knowledge of the field.

The limited follow-up data may also suggest that Christian theological distance learning professionals fall into two different categories: (1) those with knowledge of quality standards in online learning who chase higher ideals/standards and (2) those with limited knowledge of quality standards who agree on the need for ideals/standards but do not genuinely understand what that entails. Institutions and accreditation agencies can take steps to counteract the latter category by encouraging a certain level of expertise and/or educational attainment among those who lead Christian online theological programs.

**Standards of Quality = Imperfectly Practiced Ideals**

Seventy-six percent of Christian theological distance learning professionals agreed that they were achieving their ideals regarding standards of quality in online learning. While 76% of distance learning leaders may agree about achieving their ideals, the meaning of those results may need further explanation. As mentioned above by the follow-up participants, the meaning of quality standards may not be clear and may generate varying ideas among different leaders. Yet regardless of whether Christian theological distance learning professionals pursue their
ideals with knowledge or without it, all data suggests that these leaders are pursuing some type of ideal. As Christian distance learning professionals pursue their ideals of standards of quality, the limited follow-up findings suggest that quality standards in online learning can only be imperfectly practiced. They cannot be perfectly achieved.

Even though standards of quality may not be able to be achieved perfectly, the lack of clarity on what quality standards are or what they mean highlights a professional development need. A need exists for those leading online learning programs to receive more training in distance and online education. Yet the need for training may not be limited to just the distance learning leaders’ knowledge. Gaps in knowledge and understanding may also exist at various other levels of the academic organization. More training and development may be needed for the faculty who serve on the front lines of online learning and/or for the varying levels of academic and institutional administrators serving in the background.

Every Issue Has Two Sides for Christian Theological Distance Learning Professionals

When considering the issues of implementing standards of quality in Christian online theological education, the follow-up data suggest that every issue distance learning professionals encounter has the potential to help or hinder their progress. From the follow-up responses, four items that participants listed were duplicated as both areas of success and challenge. The four issues of implementing standards that were identified as both an area of success and an area of challenge are:

1. Faculty development,
2. Online course design and development,
3. Quality of community learning interaction, and
4. Quality of overall academic program.

Beyond these four issues duplicated in both lists, an argument could be made that all issues in online learning have two sides. The limited follow-up data would suggest that every issue encountered within Christian online theological education can be an area of success (a strength) or an area of challenge (a weakness).

**Implications**

Online learning is making a significant impact on Christian theological education. As fiscal realities and students’ needs for flexible learning options increase, online learning will continue to be a vital part of theological education’s future. How Christian theological institutions implement online learning will have significant ramifications on how well they accomplish their unique missions and purposes. This research has implications for a broad spectrum of Christian theological education. These implications apply to the following groups: distance learning professionals, administrators, faculty, and accreditation agencies.

**Recommendations for Distance Learning Professionals**

This research generated three recommendations for distance learning professionals in Christian theological education. These recommendations are discussed below.
Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education Needed

Distance learning professionals need standards of quality for Christian online theological education. As indicated by participants from the follow-up questionnaire, many standards of quality may overlap with the broader ideas of quality in online learning. However, distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education need to determine which existing standards serve Christian theological education’s goals. This research identified 24 standards -- many of the standards narrowed from the broader field of higher education and several added to achieve the unique aims of Christian higher education. More research needs to be conducted to create a more comprehensive set of quality standards for Christian online theological education.

Distance learning professionals not only need quality standards for online learning at the course-level, they also need to develop standards of quality at the program-level. This research revealed varying perceptions of how Christian distance learning professionals achieve standards of quality in Christian online learning. Christian theological distance learning professionals could benefit from researching, developing, finding, or discovering standards of quality for online learning at both the course-level and the program-level. Having standards of quality for Christian online theological education at the program-level, in addition to the course-level, can help these distance learning professionals define quality and measure its progress. Distance learning professionals, their faculty, and their institutions would benefit from both sets of quality standards. Utilizing both sets of quality standards would help these professionals achieve higher levels of online learning excellence.
Formal Academic Training Needed

Distance learning professionals in Christian theological education need formal academic training in online learning. With only 50% of participants in this study having any type of formal training, a clear need for training in online learning seems to exist. Whether graduate certificates, masters, doctoral programs, or training certificates from recognized online learning organizations, distance learning professionals in Christian theological education may need to grow in their knowledge of online learning. A person would hesitate to engage a surgeon who did not learn how to use the essential, most up-to-date surgical equipment. As professionals, it is expected that they keep our performance updated and sharp. Yet many distance learning professionals do not have any formal academic training in their field. They may or may not be conversant with the broader literature and research on distance education, online learning, or teaching and learning. Distance learning professionals can do a good job apart from formal training through experience and self-study. However, completing some type of formal academic training may help them to have a trained mind, develop more skills, and give them a broader, systematic, holistic perspective of their field/profession.

Persevere in Efforts

Theological institutions need quality distance learning professionals to remain committed to their efforts for the long term. Their leadership and services are vital to helping theological educational institutions navigate through the challenges of contemporary higher education. Given both the internal and external institutional challenges they encounter, those leading distance learning in Christian theological education need encouragement, incentive,
and rewards from their institutions. However, distance learning professionals may also need to determine what an acceptable level of quality is for their institution and themselves. Like many administrators, they must learn to live in the gap between their ideals and reality, as reality is never perfect. They will have to learn to live in the silently contested space between their ideals for online learning and its reality.

**Recommendations for Theological Education**

This study identified various issues confronting Christian theological education about online and distance education. First, the Literature Review from Chapter 2 identified that a bias (or even prejudice) exists among those involved within Christian theological education. They are biased (or prejudiced) against online learning and often hold unspoken and unexamined assumptions against it (Gresham, 2006; Paris, 2000; S. Lowe, 2010; Osborn, 2006). Second, this study discovered that only 50% of Directors of Online Learning (and associated job titles) have any formal training in online and distance education. Third, this study revealed that, of those with formal training, only 8.3% Directors of Online Learning hold a doctoral degree and only 25% have earned a master’s degree in online or distance education or related educational field. With wide-scale unspoken assumptions and the need for increased training existing among those serving in theological institutions, Christian theological education may need to address these vital training needs at every level.

To address these training needs, mentioned below are several recommended actions for (1) executive-level Christian theological administrators who oversee online learning at an institution and for (2) accreditation leaders who oversee a collection of institutions. First,
theological administrators should consider deeply investing in training focused on both online learning and educational practice for their institutions. This study shared a list of seven issues that are prevalent challenges to online learning’s development at one’s institution. It also found that while online learning programs may be implementing the minimum standards required by accreditation, they may not be achieving high-levels of pedagogical quality in online learning. Solving these widespread issues will require implementing training at various institutional levels to ensure a better understanding of online/distance education’s unique requirements, models, and needs.

Second, findings suggest that faculty would benefit from completing continuing education and professional development on a regular basis at their institution’s expense. Just as medical staff or doctors have to complete a certain number of continuing education units within a period of time, educators should have to do the same. Faculty should likely have to complete certificates, attend seminars, or do a combination of work to demonstrate on-going professional competence as instructors, not just be researchers in their academic discipline. Faculty may or may not seek professional development on their own. Choice should be eliminated from the equation. The work faculty do is too important for faculty development to be left in the midst of accreditation requirements and left to choice, preference, or chance.

Third, accreditation agencies should consider making stronger requirements for regular, systematic, and on-going continuing education/professional development among their accredited institutions. They should consider requiring all faculty, administrators, and staff to complete a specific amount of continuing education/professional development. Accreditation agencies have immense power, and they should consider adding measurable continuing
education unit requirements as a standard that schools must meet for accreditation. Much like doctors and other medical professionals, all faculty, administrators, and staff would benefit from completing a certain number of continuing education units within a given period of time. Specifically, ATS should consider requiring all Christian theological institutions to implement a systematic continuing education/professional development program that requires all administrators, faculty, and staff to complete a certain number of continuing education units with a specified period of time on a continuing basis.

As the pedagogical tectonic plates undergirding contemporary education continue to shift and as online and distance learning options continue to meet a large percentage of students’ needs, Christian theological education will have to evolve, in part, with the educational times. As ATS, other accreditation agencies, and theological institutions adapt, they will help Christian theological education thrive through shifting educational perspectives and victoriously adjust to any educational revolution that may come their way.

Suggestions for Future Study

Although this study identifies 24 standards of quality in Christian online theological education and highlights issues related to implementing these quality standards, further research needs to be conducted on this topic. First, more research needs to be conducted on course-level standards of quality in Christian online theological education. This study serves merely as a starting point. Larger questions on course-level quality standards remain. Are there more than 24 quality standards for Christian online theological education? The literature reviewed as part of this study would suggest that more than just the 24 quality standards
identified here exist. Which course-level quality standards are the most important? Would a broader range of distance learning professionals -- Christian or otherwise -- include these 24 course-level quality standards? Research could be conducted that elaborated on these quality standards in more detail. Future research could also examine how these course-level standards apply to a particular course, series of courses, or department. Any of the above additional studies and investigations would help further the conversation on quality within Christian online learning.

Second, more research needs to be conducted on what constitutes quality and how it is achieved within Christian online theological education. Research questions #2 and #3 in this study aimed at these issues. As noted throughout this document, however, the follow-up data lacked enough breadth to be conclusive. As a result, many questions remain. What exactly do distance learning professionals in Christian theological education mean by the term “quality?” Is it merely accreditation standards, high ideals from a well-trained perspective, or something altogether different? Do these distance learning professionals critique their colleague’s ability to achieve quality higher than their own? Does formal academic training in distance and online education give Christian distance learning professionals a higher standard of quality that they strive for? Does it give them a different perspective on it? What are the challenges of implementing quality standards in Christian theological education? This study, due to limited follow-up responses, merely scratched the surface on this last question. Its findings lacked the research breadth to be conclusive, but the collected data suggests much more can be discovered on the challenges encountered by distance learning professionals in Christian theological education.
Third, since this study had to be adapted during its administration, conducting a similar study using different research designs could be beneficial. The same sample could be studied using a different mixed methods approach. The research method that was planned originally for this study -- an explanatory, sequential mixed methods approach -- could be replicated. This particular study attempted to accommodate participants’ requests within a given period of time via the follow-up questionnaire. In hindsight, conducting individual follow-up interviews may have been a more effective adaptation. However, hindsight, even in research studies, is usually 20/20. If aiming at this same (or similarly sized) sample, a thorough qualitative study might also be beneficial since the sample is small. If other studies focused on the issues of implementing quality standards, those results would likely provide more perspective than the limited, non-conclusive data produced here.

Fourth, since this study was limited by its small sample of experts within theological education, similar beneficial studies could be conducted aiming at different samples. A research study could sample all Directors of Online Learning (and associated job titles) at all ATS schools and not limit itself to a small, expert sample. A study could examine various academic positions’ (i.e., Vice Presidents, Provosts, Deans) perspective on quality standards in Christian online theological education. Or studies could broaden their sample even further and move outside ATS-accredited graduate theological education. Research studies could explore Directors of Online Learning within Christian higher education, which would include seminaries, Christian colleges, Christian universities, etc. Future studies could focus on differing levels of Christian higher education (i.e., certificate, undergraduate, graduate, doctoral). Future research could examine a particular regional accrediting body, a particular Christian higher
education association/society, or any niche community within Christian higher education. Since quality is often a construct defined by a particular community, it would be insightful to see how differing communities in Christian higher education identified quality standards and the issues related to them. Then, it could be enlightening to compare and contrast one set of results with another community’s ideas on quality standards. One could research how different communities vary regarding quality standards and what, if any, insights could be gained from the comparisons (i.e., online undergraduate Christian higher education vs. Christian online theological education; Christian online theological education vs. public higher education; Christian higher education vs. public higher education).

Fifth, more research needs to be conducted on the relationship between faculty and online learning. What type of professional and continuing education exists within theological institutions to help improve the pedagogical skill and knowledge of their faculty? Is it conducted systematically? Is the training’s content and/or curriculum effective? Does it help faculty move from educational theory to pedagogical practice? What are theological faculty’s perceptions of continuing education and professional development focused on online learning? What challenges exist that must be confronted? When implemented, what results are produced from continuing education and professional development among faculty, teaching, and online learning?

Sixth, more research needs to be conducted, especially as it relates to online learning, on accreditation agencies’ impact on program quality. When accreditation agencies implement new or higher standards, to what degree does it result in program quality improvements?
What effects do new accreditation mandates have on institutions? Does an institution’s online program quality improve before, during, and/or after accreditation reviews?

Seventh, more research needs to be conducted integrating the teaching, and learning literature of higher education into Christian online theological education. Much of the teaching and learning educational literature of higher education remains foreign and excluded from Christian online theological education. Christian theological education must overcome its lack of knowledge through engagement with the educational literature of higher education. Such integrative research may help broaden the knowledge, skill, and understanding of persons engaged in Christian online theological education.

Summary

This research examined standards of quality in Christian online theological education. As a result, it identified 24 standards of quality. It discovered that various levels (or a potential hierarchy) may exist within quality standards with some elements being more important or critical than others. This study also discovered that 76% of distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education would agree that they are achieving their ideals of quality in online learning. However, it also identified that varying levels of actual practice exist when implementing quality standards. This study highlighted that any ideal of quality in education can only be imperfectly achieved. From the limited follow-up data, the research also identified seven areas of success and seven areas of challenge that distance learning professionals in Christian online theological education may encounter when implementing standards of quality.
From the research conducted, this study made two conclusions regarding Christian online theological education and presented seven themes from the primary findings. The research conducted in this study, with its conclusions and themes, led to seven different implications for Christian education. These seven implications address four groups within Christian theological education – distance learning professionals, theological administrators, faculty, and accreditation agencies.

This study recommends further research in several areas of Christian online theological education. It recommends further study on: (1) course-level standards of quality; (2) defining what constitutes quality and how it is achieved within theological education; (3) similar and different research methods on this study’s topic; (4) similar studies on different samples and populations; (5) the relationship between faculty in theological education and online learning; (6) the influence of accreditation agencies on theological institutions to see how they promote and affect institutional change, and (7) how to engage and train Christian educators more broadly with educational literature in both online learning and the study of teaching and learning. Theological institutions, and the faculty and administrators serving within them, will benefit from increasing their knowledge in vital areas of contemporary education. The work theological institutions and the people within them do is too vital to not invest seriously in continuing professional development. Theological institutions need to be continually learning, growing, and evolving -- not just from within the isolated silos of theological education but from active engagement with the broader educational world.
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Academic Press.


APPENDIX A:

DRAFT SURVEY

Quality in Christian Online Theological Education Survey

Survey Introduction

Length of Survey Disclosure:
The survey will take between 5-10 minutes.

Survey Directions:
This survey will consist of four parts.
1. The first part asks twelve questions related to your background (and all responses will be kept strictly confidential).
2. The second asks you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with 35 statements related to online theological education. Please select the response that most accurately reflects how important you believe each item is to quality online learning in theological education.
3. The third part explores questions asking you to assess the degree to which your institution implements these items.
4. The fourth part provides you with two open-ended questions where you can offer additional information or comments.

Consent Statement:
By advancing to the next page, you are consenting to participate in this survey.

Background

1) Please identify the denominational affiliation of your school.*
2) Approximately how many total students attend your institution?*

( ) 1-50
( ) 51-100
( ) 101-250
( ) 251-500
( ) 501-1000
( ) 1001-1500
( ) 1501-2000
( ) 2001-2500
( ) 2501-3000
( ) 3000+

3) Approximately what percentage of your students take one or more online courses during the last year?*

_________________________________________________

4) Approximately what percent of courses at your institution were offered in an online format last year?*

_________________________________________________

5) How many courses are offered online each year at your institution?*

_________________________________________________

6) What is your job title related to online learning (e.g., Dean of Distance Learning, Director of Online Learning, Director of Continuing Education, Teaching and Learning Coordinator, Vice President of Online Learning, Director of Off-Campus Programs.)*

_________________________________________________
7) How many years of experience do you have as an online learning administrator?*
_________________________________________________ 

8) Have you had any formal academic training in online learning?*  
(For example, have you completed a certificate or degree in the topic?)
( ) Yes
( ) No

9) If you have had formal academic training in distance education or online learning, list any program or credential you completed. If none, please put "n/a" or "not applicable."*
_________________________________________________ 

10) What school/institute/seminary did you attend for online training? 
_________________________________________________ 

11) Please indicate your age range.*
( ) 21-24
( ) 25-34
( ) 35-44
( ) 45-54
( ) 55-64
( ) 65+
( ) Prefer not to answer 

12) Please identify your gender.*
Quality in Online Learning

13) Please select how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the 35 items that complete the question stem below as they relate to quality in online theological education.*

Online courses should...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Require consistent weekly involvement of instructors (e.g., they maintain a weekly social presence, teaching presence within the course).</td>
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<td>b. Require consistent weekly involvement of students within the course.</td>
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<td>c. Provide clear guidelines on course communications (e.g., appropriate communication in discussion boards; best way to contact instructor; instructor response time to emails)</td>
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<td>d. Provide clear directions for all assessments and learning activities.</td>
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<td>e. Encourage multiple types of learning interactions (e.g.</td>
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interactions with content, instructor, other students) throughout the course.

g. Have at least one assessment/learning activity that requires students to apply what they have learned to their individual spiritual lives.

h. Be designed so that instructors have to provide constructive and timely feedback to students.

i. Identify the type of feedback students can expect to receive on learning activities.

j. Clarify when students will receive feedback on learning activities.

k. Achieve all the stated learning goals/objectives.

l. Use assessment criteria/methods that directly measure the stated learning goals.
m. Clearly identify how students can connect with the various campus resources available to them (e.g., technology support, financial aid, academic advising).

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n. Build an authentic learning community that requires various types of interactions (e.g., teacher-to-student; student-to-content; student-to-student).

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o. Use a variety of assessment methods (i.e., at least four or more assessment methods—quizzes, forums, written assignments, group projects).

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p. Use learning activities that align with the stated learning goals and assessment criteria.

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q. Use forward-looking assessments (i.e., assessments that reflect how students might use what they have learned in future situations).

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r. Clearly identify all grading policies and assessment criteria.

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s. Use active learning strategies (i.e., strategies that require students not to

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<td>listen passively but to do something with the information that they are learning.</td>
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<td>t. Assess the utility of media components (e.g., lecture video, virtual conference) to ensure that they are accomplishing their specific learning goals/objectives.</td>
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<td>u. Be structured to encourage higher-ordered thinking (e.g., critical thinking, analysis, synthesis of ideas).</td>
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<td>v. Have a clear sequence and structure.</td>
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<td>w. Practice elements consistent with good web design (e.g., easy navigation, using headings, bold, links and image appropriately).</td>
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<td>x. Use a variety of content delivery methods (i.e., online videos, reading, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish learning goals.</td>
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<td>y. Identify the support services available to students with accessibility issues.</td>
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<td>z. Be designed according to a set of standards/guidelines that establish minimum expectations for online course development.</td>
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<td>aa. Use current and emerging technology appropriately.</td>
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<td>bb. Require students to work in groups (or teams).</td>
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<td>cc. Promote an open collaborative environment among students.</td>
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<td>dd. Separate content into clear self-contained modules (segments).</td>
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<td>ee. Allow course modules (segments) to vary in length according to the complexity needed to achieve learning outcomes.</td>
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<td>ff. Be designed only by full-time, on-campus faculty at your institution.</td>
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<td>gg. Be designed by the best expert in your field (even if they are not at your institution).</td>
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<td>hh. Be delivered only by the full-time, on-campus faculty at your institution.</td>
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<td>ii. Be delivered only by trained, skilled online</td>
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</table>
Your Institution

14) In light of my previous answers and my ideals for online learning, I feel that my institution's online courses/program exemplify "standards of quality" in online theological education.*

( ) Strongly disagree   ( ) Disagree   ( ) Neutral   ( ) Agree   ( ) Strongly agree

Feedback

In this section, you will have the opportunity to:

- add any additional "standards of quality" that you think may have been missing from the previous selections
- provide any additional info or comments you want to contribute to this study.

15) If there are any "standards of quality" not listed previously that you would like to add, please specify those below. If you do not have any to add, please continue to the next question.

Added standard of quality 1: ______________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 2: ______________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 3: ______________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 4: ______________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 5: ______________________________________________________

16) Please provide below any additional information or comments you might have regarding "standards of quality" in Christian online learning.

____________________________________________
____________________________________________

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Thank You!

Thank you for taking part in this survey.
Your responses are vital to this research study and have been recorded. You can now close the survey.
Your participation is very much appreciated!

[Once the participant completes the entire survey, the Thank You Screen will invite them to submit their email address to be considered as a potential member for a focus group.]
October 15, 2014

Timohty Baltrip
L-CACHE - Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career & Higher Education
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00018971
Title: Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

Study Approval Period: 10/14/2014 to 10/14/2015

Dear Mr. Baltrip:

On 10/14/2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Quality in Christian Online Theological Education

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Informed Consent for Online survey- (**granted a waiver)
*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s). *Waivers are not stamped.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX C:
PILOT TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

Pilot Test Questionnaire--Responding to the Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education Survey

Directions:
After completing the Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education survey, please complete the following pilot test questionnaire. Your responses and feedback will be extremely helpful in creating an effective research instrument. This pilot test questionnaire consists of nine short questions. It will likely take less than five minutes to complete.

1) Is the purpose of the survey clear?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

If you answered “no,” please indicate how the survey’s purpose is confusing and recommend the changes needed.

2) Are the survey’s directions clear?*

☐ Yes
If you answered "no," what part of the survey's directions are not clear?


3) Are the survey's questions clear?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered "no," please list the questions that are not clear and recommend the changes needed.


4) Are the survey's answer choices clear?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered "no," please list which answer choices are not clear and recommend the changes needed.


5) Were there any questions in this survey which need improvement regarding user-friendliness and/or clarity?*

228
6) Did any of the survey's questions require you to think too long or hard before responding?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

If you answered “yes,” which specific questions required you to think too long or too hard?

7) Do any of the questions encourage bias when responding?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

If so, which questions encourage bias?
8) How many minutes did it take you to complete the survey? (please enter a number below)*

☐

9) Is the survey too long?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

If you answered "yes," please recommend the changes needed to improve the survey's length.

☐

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this pilot test questionnaire. Your responses and feedback will be invaluable in shaping the Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education survey.
APPENDIX D:

EXPERT PANEL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Welcome
Thanks for agreeing to fill out the expert panel review questionnaire. I greatly appreciate your willingness to be involved.

Introduction and Purpose:

The purpose of this expert panel review is to evaluate the survey instrument that will be used in the “Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education” research study. Please feel free to share your honest and open thoughts. Your help will be invaluable, as it will help make the instrument and the entire study more effective.

Expert Review Questions

Do you feel this survey addresses the most important factors related to quality in Christian online theological education? If not, what factors are missing?

Do you feel this instrument will produce effective results related to standards of quality in Christian online theological education? Why or why not?

What questions, if any, may not be relevant to standards of quality in Christian online theological education?

What questions, if any, should be added to this survey to effectively survey standards of quality in Christian online theological education?
Survey Introduction

Length of Survey Disclosure:
The survey will take between 5-10 minutes.

Survey Directions:
This survey will consist of four parts.
   1) The first part asks twelve questions related to your background (and all responses will be kept strictly confidential).
   2) The second asks you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with 35 statements related to online theological education. Please select the response that most accurately reflects how important you believe each item is to quality online learning in theological education.
   3) The third part asks some questions asking you to assess the degree to which your institution implements these items.
   4) The fourth part provides you with two open-ended questions where you can offer additional information or comments.

Consent Statement:
By advancing to the next page, you are consenting to participate in this survey.

Background

1) Please indicate the denominational affiliation of your school.*
2) Please select how many total students attend your institution?*

( ) 1-50  
( ) 51-100  
( ) 101-250  
( ) 251-500  
( ) 501-1000  
( ) 1001-1500  
( ) 1501-2000  
( ) 2001-2500  
( ) 2501-3000  
( ) 3000+

3) Please indicate approximately what percentage of your students took one or more online courses during the last year?*

_________________________________________________

4) Please indicate approximately what percent of courses at your institution were offered in an online format last year?*

_________________________________________________

5) How many online courses does your institution offer each year?*

_________________________________________________

6) Please write in your job title related to online learning (e.g., Dean of Distance Learning, Director of Online Learning, Director of Continuing Education, Teaching and Learning Coordinator, Vice President of Online Learning, Director of Off-Campus Programs)?*

_________________________________________________
7) How many years have severed/worked as an online learning administrator?*

8) Do you have any formal academic training specifically related to distance education or online learning?*
   ( ) Yes
   ( ) No

9) Please list any program or credential you have completed that is related to distance learning. If none, please put "n/a" or "not applicable."*

10) What institution or program did you attend for online training?

11) Please identify your age range.*
   ( ) 21-24
   ( ) 25-34
   ( ) 35-44
   ( ) 45-54
   ( ) 55-64
   ( ) 65+
   ( ) Prefer not to answer

12) Please indicate your gender.*
   ( ) Male
   ( ) Female
**Quality in Online Learning**

**13) Please select *how important* you believe each of the following 25 items are as they relate to quality in online theological education.*

**Online courses should...**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Low Importance</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) Require consistent weekly involvement of instructors (e.g., they maintain a</td>
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<td>weekly social presence, teaching presence within the course).</td>
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<td>b) Require consistent weekly involvement of students within the course.</td>
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<td>c) Provide clear guidelines on course communications (e.g., appropriate</td>
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<td>communication in discussion boards; best way to contact instructor; instructor</td>
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<td>response time to emails; etc.)</td>
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<td>d) Provide clear directions for all assessments and learning activities.</td>
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<td>e)</td>
<td>Encourage multiple types of learning interactions (e.g., interactions with content, instructor, other students) throughout the course.</td>
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<td>f)</td>
<td>Provide specific requirements for any type of learning interaction (i.e., how much a student should write in a forum reply, how many replies they should give, who they should reply to)</td>
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<td>g)</td>
<td>Have at least one assessment/learning activity that requires students to apply what they have learned to their individual spiritual lives.</td>
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<td>h)</td>
<td>Be designed so that instructors have to provide constructive and timely feedback to students.</td>
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<td>i)</td>
<td>Identify the type of feedback students can expect to receive on learning activities.</td>
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<td>j)</td>
<td>Clarify when students will receive</td>
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<td>Feedback on learning activities.</td>
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<td>k)</td>
<td>Achieve all the stated learning goals/ objectives.</td>
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<td>l)</td>
<td>Use assessment criteria/methods that directly measure the stated learning goals.</td>
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<td>m)</td>
<td>Clearly identify how students can connect with the various campus resources available to them (e.g., technology support, financial aid, academic advising).</td>
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<td>n)</td>
<td>Build an authentic learning community that requires various types of interactions (e.g., teacher-to-student; student-to-content; student-to-student).</td>
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<td>o)</td>
<td>Use a variety of assessment methods (i.e., at least four or more assessment methods—quizzes, forums, written assignments, group projects).</td>
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<td>Use learning activities that align</td>
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with the stated learning goals and assessment criteria.

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<td>q) Use forward-looking assessments (i.e., assessments that reflect how students might use what they have learned in future situations).</td>
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<td>r) Clearly identify all grading policies and assessment criteria.</td>
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<td>s) Use active learning strategies (i.e., strategies that require students not to passively listen but to do something with the information that they are learning).</td>
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Your Institution

14) In light of my previous answers and my ideals for online learning, I believe that my institution’s online courses/program models "standards of quality" in online theological education.*

( ) Strongly disagree  ( ) Disagree  ( ) Neutral  ( ) Agree  ( ) Strongly agree

Feedback

In this section, you will have the opportunity to:
- add any additional "standards of quality" that you think may have been missing from the previous selections
- provide any additional info or comments you want to contribute to this study.

15) Are there any “standards of quality” that you would like to add? If so, please specify them below. If you do not have any to add, please continue to the next question.
Added standard of quality 1: __________________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 2: __________________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 3: __________________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 4: __________________________________________________________
Added standard of quality 5: __________________________________________________________

16) If you have any additional comments or information regarding "standards of quality" in Christian online learning, please provide it in the space below.
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
Thank You!

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Your responses are vital to this research study and have been recorded. You can now close the survey. Your participation is very much appreciated!
APPENDIX F:

DRAFT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Welcome
Thanks for agreeing to participate in this focus group session. I greatly appreciate your willingness to be involved.

Introduction and Purpose:
My name is Ryan Baltrip, and I will be serving as the moderator.

The purpose of this focus group is to evaluate the survey instrument that will be used in the “Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education” research study. Please feel free to share you honest and open thoughts during our time together. Your help will be invaluable, as it will help make the instrument and the entire study more effective.

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Please tell us your name, where you live, and the institution you currently serve.
2. When you think of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, what comes to mind?
3. Based on your experience and understanding, does the preliminary analysis of these results seem accurate?
4. How well do these findings reflect your experience and understanding of quality in online learning?
5. What are your top 5 or 10 standards of quality?
6. As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?
7. How well do you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey’s results?
8. What are the challenges or issues one might encounter when trying to implement the standards of quality identified in this study’s findings?
9. Are there any concluding thoughts that you have about standards of quality in online learning that you would like to share before we end?
APPENDIX G:

SURVEY OF QUALITY IN ONLINE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Survey Introduction

Length of Survey Disclosure:
The survey will take between 5-10 minutes.

Survey Directions:
This survey will consist of four parts.

1) The first part asks twelve questions related to your background (and all responses will be kept strictly confidential).
2) The second asks you to rate how strongly you agree or disagree with 35 statements related to online theological education. Please select the response that most accurately reflects how important you believe each item is to quality online learning in theological education.
3) The third part explores questions asking you to assess the degree to which your institution implements these items.
4) The fourth part provides you with two open-ended questions where you can offer additional information or comments.

Consent Statement:
By advancing to the next page, you are consenting to participate in this survey.

Background

1) Please identify the denominational affiliation of your school.*

2) Approximately how many total students attend your institution?*
3) Approximately what percentage of your students took one or more online courses during the last year?*

4) Approximately what percent of courses at your institution were offered in an online format last year?*

5) How many courses are offered online each year at your institution?*
6) What is your job title related to online learning (e.g., Dean of Distance Learning, Director of Online Learning, Teaching and Learning Coordinator, Vice President of Online Learning)?*


7) How many years of administrative experience do you have directly related to online learning?*


8) Have you had any formal academic training in distance education or online learning?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

9) If you’ve had formal academic training in distance education or online learning, list any program or credential you completed. If none, please put "n/a" or "not applicable."*


10) What school/institute/seminary did you attend for online training?


11) Please indicate your age range.*

☐ 21-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44
12) Please identify your gender.*

☐ Male

☐ Female

Quality in Online Learning

13) Please select how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the 35 items that complete the statement stem below as they relate to quality in online theological education.

Online courses should...*

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>Neutral</th>
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<td>a. Require consistent weekly involvement of instructors (e.g., they maintain a weekly social presence, teaching presence within the course).</td>
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<td>c. Provide clear guidelines on course interactions (e.g., appropriate communication in discussion boards; best way to contact instructor; instructor response time to emails; etc.)</td>
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<td>d. Provide clear directions for all assessments and learning activities.</td>
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<td>e. Encourage multiple types of learning interactions (e.g. student-content, student-instructor, student-students)</td>
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<td>f. Provide specific requirements for any type of learning interaction (i.e., how much a student should write in a forum reply, how many replies they should give, who they should reply to).</td>
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<td>n. Require various types of interactions (e.g., teacher-to-student; student-to-content; student-to-student) to help foster an authentic learning community.</td>
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<td>o. Use a variety of assessment methods (i.e., at least four or more assessment methods—quizzes, forums, written assignments, group projects).</td>
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<td>p. Use learning activities that align with the stated learning goals and assessment criteria.</td>
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|cc. Promote an open collaborative environment among students. |   |   |   |   |   |
|dd. Separate content into clear |   |   |   |   |   |</p>
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Your Institution

253
14) In light of my previous answers and my ideals for online learning, I feel that my institution's online courses/program exemplify "standards of quality" in online theological education.*

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<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Feedback

In this section, you will have the opportunity to:

- add any additional "standards of quality" that you think may have been missing from the previous selections
- provide any additional info or comments you want to contribute to this study.

15) If there are any "standards of quality" not listed previously that you would like to add, please specify those below. If you do not have any to add, please continue to the next question.

Added standard of quality 1: 

Added standard of quality 2: 

Added standard of quality 3: 

Added standard of quality 4: 

Added standard of quality 5: 

16) Please provide below any additional information or comments you might have regarding "standards of quality" in Christian online theological education.
Focus Group Participation?

Would you be interested in participating in a focus group discussion on this topic?

After all the survey data has been collected and analyzed, the researcher will be conducting an online focus group to discuss the results. Participation is voluntary and all individual survey responses will be kept confidential.

If you would like to participate in the follow-up focus group discussion, please enter your email address and name below.

17) Please enter your email below if you would like to participate in the follow-up focus group discussion:


18) Please enter your name if you would like to participate in the follow-up focus group discussion:


Thank You!

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Your responses are vital to this research study and have been recorded. You can now close the
survey.
Your participation is very much appreciated!
My name is Ryan Baltrip, and I am a Ph.D student in the Curriculum and Instruction Higher Education program at the University of South Florida in Tampa, FL. I'm also a seminary graduate of and currently serving as Director of Online Learning at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY.

As part of my doctoral studies, I have been researching quality in online learning. In particular, for my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a study on quality in Christian online theological education.

I would like to invite you to take part in this research study. You have been selected because of your association with the Technology in Theological Education Group (TTEG) of the ATS. Your participation and involvement would be most helpful in providing an understanding of current perspectives in Christian online theological education.

This study will be conducted via an online survey next week. You will receive the main email invitation to participate on [insert date]. The email will contain the URL link to the survey. It will consist of 16 main questions and take less than 10 minutes to participate.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Your brother in Christ,
Ryan Baltrip
APPENDIX I:

MAIN SURVEY INVITATION EMAIL

Last week, you received an email about participating in a doctoral research study related to online learning in Christian theological education. My name is Ryan Baltrip, a PhD student at the University of South Florida and Director of Online Learning at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of fulfilling my doctoral program, and I would greatly appreciate your participation.

This study will seek to identify standards of quality in Christian online theological education. Your participation by completing this survey will be a vital part of this research.

The survey consists of 16 main questions. The entire survey will take between 5 and 10 minutes. The survey is open now and will close on [date]. Your responses will be anonymous and confidential. All data and corresponding files will be password protected.

You can access the survey by clicking this link [link].

By clicking the link, you will be taken to the first page of the survey where a brief consent form will be available for you to review. You will be able to consent to participate in the survey by clicking "next" to advance to the first survey question.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your input will be invaluable to this research project, and I greatly appreciate your help in completing it.

Your brother in Christ,
Ryan Baltrip
APPENDIX J:

REVISED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Welcome
Thanks for agreeing to participate in this focus group session. I greatly appreciate your willingness to be involved.

Introduction and Purpose:
My name is Ryan Baltrip, and I will be serving as the moderator.

The purpose of this focus group is to evaluate the survey instrument that will be used in the “Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education” research study. Please feel free to share your honest and open thoughts during our time together. Your help will be invaluable, as it will help make the instrument and the entire study more effective.

Focus Group Interview Questions
Introduction
3. Please tell us your name, where you live, and the institution you currently serve.

Standards of Quality in Christian Online Theological Education
4. When you think of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, what comes to mind?
5. From the survey results on the 35 items in question #13, should only the top 24 items—the ones with an average mean of 4.25 or higher—be identified as quality standards?
6. Question #15 on the survey asked about adding items to the list of standards. Of the 10 items suggested by participants to add, which ones should be added to a list of quality standards for Christian online theological education?
7. How well do these survey results reflect your experience and understanding of quality in online learning?
8. If you had to pick 5 standards of quality that are most important to/for Christian online theological education, which ones which you select?
9. As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed?

Degree that distance learning professional believe they are implementing recommended standards of quality in Christian online theological education
10. On question #14, participants were asked if they feel their institution implements standards of quality in Christian online theological education. The average response was a 3.8 out of 5, indicating an average which was slightly below “agree.” Do you believe that most Christian online theological education programs would “agree” that they are achieving their ideals of quality?

11. Out of all the Christian online theological education programs, do you believe that 76% of Christian online programs practice standards of quality?

12. How well do you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey’s results?

Challenges, issues, and successes of trying to implement standards of quality in Christian online theological education

13. What are the strengths or successes one might encounter trying to implement standards of quality in Christian online theological education?

14. What are the challenges or issues one might encounter when trying to implement the standards of quality identified in this study’s findings?

15. Are there any concluding thoughts that you have about standards of quality in online learning that you would like to share before we end?
APPENDIX K:
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE ON QUALITY IN CHRISTIAN ONLINE
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION SURVEY

Survey Introduction

Length of Questionnaire Disclosure:
This questionnaire will take between 5-10 minutes.

Questionnaire Directions:
The questionnaire consists of 12 questions discussing the survey results of the Quality in Christian Online Theological Survey. All responses will remain confidential.

Consent Statement:
By advancing to the next page, you are consenting to participate in this questionnaire.

Background

1) Approximately how many total students attend your institution?*
☐ 1-50
☐ 51-100
☐ 101-250
☐ 251-500
☐ 501-1000
☐ 1001-1500
2) How many years of administrative experience do you have directly related to online learning?*

☐ 1501-2000
☐ 2001-2500
☐ 2501-3000
☐ 3000+

3) Have you had any formal academic training in distance education or online learning?*

☐ Yes
☐ No

4) Please indicate your age range.*

☐ 25-34
☐ 35-44
☐ 45-54
☐ 55-64
☐ 65+

5) Please indicate your gender.*

☐ Male
☐ Female

Discussing Standards
6) When you think of standards of quality in Christian online theological education, what comes to mind?*

7) On question #13 there were 35 standards of quality listed. Of those 35 items, 24 items had an average mean of 4.25 or higher. Would it be **appropriate to include the top 24** of the 35 items—the ones with an average mean of 4.25 or higher—as **quality standards** for Christian online theological education?*

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Please describe why you answered yes or no on the previous question about the top 24 items being identified as standards of quality in Christian online theological education.

**Discussing Standards (Continued)**

8) Question #15 on the survey asked about adding items to the list of standards. Participants suggested 10 different "standards" to add (listed below and in the summary report). Of the 10 items listed by participants, **which standards should be added to a list of quality standards for Christian online theological education?** (Please check all that should be included.)*

- [ ] 1. Online courses should lead to student satisfaction.
- [ ] 2. Online courses should have clear audio and video.
- [ ] 3. Online courses should be academic equivalent to on-campus learning.
4. Online courses should accomplish mission of the institution.

5. Online course should include live, synchronous teaching to accomplish spiritual formation.

6. Online courses should include student-to-God interaction.

7. Online courses should encourage a student’s fidelity.

8. Online courses should be designed to develop a student’s faith integration as they learn.

9. Online courses should include course introductions.

10. Online courses should contain current instructional materials.

9) Of the items listed on question #13 of the survey AND the 10 potential additional standards mentioned above, which ones are the most important for Christian online theological education? If you had to **pick 5 standards of quality** that are **most important to/for Christian online theological education**, which ones do you select?

To identify one of the 35 items in question #13, please type in the corresponding letter (e.g. letters between "a" through "ii"). To identify one of the 10 added items, please type in the corresponding number above (e.g., "1" through "10").

Standard 1: 

Standard 2: 

Standard 3: 

Standard 4: 

Standard 5: 

10) As you think about implementing standards of quality, do you believe that any of the standards identified are **unrealistic, unnecessary, or not needed**?*
11) How well do these survey results reflect your experience and understanding of quality in online learning?*

Discussing Implementation

12) On question #14, participants were asked if they feel their institution implements standards of quality in Christian online theological education. The average response was a 3.8 out of 5, indicating an average which was slightly below “agree.” Do you believe that most Christian online theological education programs would “agree” that they are achieving their ideals of quality? Why or why not?*

13) Out of all the Christian online theological education programs, do you believe that 76% of Christian online programs practice standards of quality?*

☐ Yes
☐ No
Please describe why you answered "yes" or "no" to question #8 above.

14) Please describe how well you believe your online program is currently implementing the standards identified in this survey's results.

---

Discussing Challenges, Issues, and Successes

15) What are the strengths or successes one might encounter trying to implement standards of quality in Christian online theological education?*

16) What are the challenges or issues one might encounter when trying to implement the standards of quality identified in this study's findings?*
17) Are there any concluding thoughts that you have about standards of quality in online learning that you would like to share before we end?

Thank You!

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your feedback has been appreciated!
APPENDIX L:

ABBREVIATIONS AND ITEM DESCRIPTIONS FOR STANDARDS INCLUDED ON INITIAL SURVEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Standard of Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Require instructor weekly involvement</td>
<td>Require consistent weekly involvement of instructors (e.g., they maintain a weekly social presence, teaching presence within the course).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Require student weekly involvement</td>
<td>Require consistent weekly involvement of students within the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Provide clarity on course interactions</td>
<td>Provide clear guidelines on course interactions (e.g., appropriate communication in discussion boards; best way to contact instructor; instructor response time to emails).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Provide clarity for course assessments</td>
<td>Provide clear directions for all assessments and learning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Give multiple learning interactions</td>
<td>Encourage multiple types of learning interactions (e.g., student-content, student-instructor, student-students).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Provide specific requirements for interactions</td>
<td>Provide specific requirements for any type of learning interaction (i.e., how much a student should write in a forum reply, how many replies they should give, who they should reply to).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>Apply learning to spiritual lives</td>
<td>Have at least one assessment/learning activity that requires students to apply what they have learned to their individual spiritual lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>Provide timely feedback</td>
<td>Be designed so that instructors have to provide constructive and timely feedback to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>Identify type of feedback students receive</td>
<td>Identify the type of feedback students can expect to receive on learning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>Clarify when students receive feedback</td>
<td>Clarify when students will receive feedback on learning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>Cover learning objectives</td>
<td>Cover all the stated learning goals/objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l</td>
<td>Assess learning objectives</td>
<td>Use assessment criteria/methods that directly measure the stated learning goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>Connect to campus resources</td>
<td>Identify how students can connect with the various campus resources available to them (e.g., technology support, financial aid, academic advising).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>Foster authentic learning community</td>
<td>Require various types of interactions (e.g., teacher-to-student; student-to-content; student-to-student) to help foster an authentic learning community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>Use variety of assessment methods</td>
<td>Use a variety of assessment methods (i.e., at least four or more assessment methods—quizzes, forums, written assignments, group projects).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>Align activities with learning objectives</td>
<td>Use learning activities that align with the stated learning goals and assessment criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q</td>
<td>Use forward-looking assessment</td>
<td>Use forward-looking assessments (i.e., assessments that reflect how students might use what they have learned in future situations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Standard of Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>Identify grading policies</td>
<td>Identify all grading policies and assessment criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>Use active learning strategies</td>
<td>Use active learning strategies (i.e., strategies that require students not to listen passively but to do something with the information that they are learning).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>Assess media used</td>
<td>Use assessments to ensure student learning from all media components (e.g., lecture video, virtual conference).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>Encourage higher-ordered thinking</td>
<td>Be structured to encourage higher-ordered thinking (e.g., critical thinking, analysis, synthesis of ideas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>Have a clear structure</td>
<td>Have a clear sequence and structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>Practice good web design</td>
<td>Practice elements consistent with good web design (e.g. easy navigation, using headings, bold, links and image appropriately).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Use variety of delivery methods</td>
<td>Use a variety of content delivery methods (i.e., online videos, reading, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish learning goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>Identify support services</td>
<td>Identify the support services available to students with accessibility issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z</td>
<td>Design course by minimum standards</td>
<td>Be designed according to a set of standards/guidelines that establish minimum expectations for online course development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa</td>
<td>Use technology appropriately</td>
<td>Use current and emerging technology appropriately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bb</td>
<td>Have students work in groups</td>
<td>Require students to work in groups (or teams).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cc</td>
<td>Promote collaborative environment</td>
<td>Promote an open collaborative environment among students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dd</td>
<td>Separate content into modules</td>
<td>Separate content into clear self-contained modules (segments).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ee</td>
<td>Vary course module length</td>
<td>Allow course modules (segments) to vary in length according to the complexity needed to achieve learning outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ff</td>
<td>Design course with full-time faculty</td>
<td>Be designed only by full-time, on-campus faculty at your institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gg</td>
<td>Design course with best expert</td>
<td>Be designed by the best expert in your field (even if they are not at your institution).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hh</td>
<td>Deliver course with full-time faculty</td>
<td>Be delivered only by the full-time, on-campus faculty at your institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>Deliver course with skilled online instructor</td>
<td>Be delivered only by trained, skilled online instructors (even if they are not full-time, on-campus faculty).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>