

For-profit Christian school is awarded a free campus

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

A for-profit Christian university in Arizona has won one of the education world's most sought-after prizes: a free, historic, freshly renovated campus in the rolling hills of western Massachusetts.

Phoenix-based Grand Canyon University plans to open an extension campus in Northfield on a 217-acre site formerly owned by Northfield Mount Hermon School. The private secondary school sold the campus in 2009 to Hobby Lobby, a craft store chain owned by the billionaire Green family of Oklahoma.

The Greens invested \$5 million in upgrades with the intent to give it to a Christian institution. "We hope this campus will provide a home for students to find their purpose in Christ and realize their full potential in life," said Hobby Lobby president Steve Green in a statement on September 21. "We look forward to seeing what the future holds for this historic campus and for this community."

Grand Canyon University, whose president and CEO Brian Mueller built the for-profit University of Phoenix into an enterprise with 340,000 online students, is part of a movement to reinvigorate Christian higher education. Key to the effort is a for-profit model that relies heavily on tuition from online students.

GCU has 7,000 traditional students on campus in Phoenix, plus another 40,000 online. The vision for Northfield is to host 4,800 residential students and 1,200 commuters. Mueller also envisions thousands of online students in the Northeast visiting the campus for concerts, sporting events and learning programs that last a few days or weeks.

"We like to make our online students feel that they are part of the campus," Mueller said. "This will give us a home base in the Northeast to help them better identify with Grand Canyon University."

Founded in 1879 by legendary evangelist D. L. Moody, the Northfield campus attracted the Greens to the prospect of reviving Moody's evangelical legacy in a region known for secular views and liberal politics.

But giving away 43 buildings in bucolic New England proved surprisingly challenging. Late last year, plans fell through to launch a new C. S. Lewis College in Northfield after fund-raising efforts came up short. Owners solicited new proposals, first from handpicked institutions, then from a broader pool.

Controversy swelled as local activists and NMH alumni lobbied to keep the property from going to another top contender, Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. Activists argued that Moody's legacy is an inclusive one and opposed Liberty for teaching that gay relationships are immoral.

In choosing a recipient, the Greens sought an institution with an orthodox Christian mission and the financial wherewithal to pull it off.

In coming months, the Greens will transfer the property to Scholarships for GCU Students, a nonprofit organization that will then lease it to GCU's holding company, GCU Education, which trades on the NASDAQ stock exchange.

After three or four years as a GCU extension site, the Northfield institution will become an independent university owned by GCU Education, Mueller said. He said it might be named "Grand Canyon University, Northeast" or "Grand Canyon University, Moody Campus." GCU aims to begin Northfield classes in fall 2014. —RNS