

# Three member schools find success with competency-based theological education

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

*I recently had occasion to study three schools that have adopted variations of competency-based theological education (CBTE). Three questions framed my study: (1) what were their circumstances that urged them to take the significant actions necessary to adopt CBTE? (2) what were the significant actions taken in the process of adopting CBTE? (3) what were some of the most notable outcomes of that adoption?*

## **The three schools**

I studied Northwest Seminary in Langley, British Columbia, Sioux Falls Seminary (now Kairos University) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky. Each was an “early adopter” of CBTE and each implemented CBTE in a distinctive way.

Northwest announced *Immerse*, its CBTE program in 2012, and admitted the first cohort of students in 2013. That same year, Sioux Falls developed an integrated system of CBTE and launched a CBTE track in three of its degree programs the following year. Lexington eliminated its traditional residential program, suspended admissions for a year, and launched its new program that incorporated significant CBTE elements in 2010. Charisse Gillett, president of Lexington, stated “the most important element of success was the faculty allowing themselves the time as a faculty to take time to explore, reflect, and



make changes to the curriculum once it was approved by the Board of Trustees.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Common elements**

Each school faced daunting challenges that led it to consider the dramatic changes necessary to fulfill its mission. The schools had financial challenges—in some cases, acute—including significant institutional debt and patterns of overspending endowment funds, and two schools faced sharp enrollment declines. Leaders in the schools, including board members, recognized that “business as usual” simply could not be sustained.

Additionally, all three schools found themselves losing touch with their sponsoring denominations, prompting each church body to report that graduates were not well prepared for the ministries then present and emerging within their communities. A leader from one school’s sponsoring denomination maintained that “They can preach, but they can’t lead a congregation.”

1 Charisse Gillett, “A Story of Institutional Transformation,” unpublished report, p. 6.

Another seminary's leader reported, "The school was not producing the skills and competencies needed for the congregations." Church leaders, board members, and leaders of all three institutions recognized that graduates were not prepared to lead in the changing contexts being experienced in their denominations.

Lexington developed a curriculum that grouped students into cohorts, required them to serve a minimum of ten hours per week in a congregation, and included competency exercises to evaluate the students' abilities to integrate material as a requirement for moving to the next level of the degree program. Students were assigned a faculty mentor as well as a ministry mentor; both were assigned to accompany the students for the duration of their programs. Faculty collaborated to develop integrative assignments, embedding integration across disciplines throughout each student's educational experience. The faculty also developed rubrics to evaluate student learning and mastery of competencies.

Northwest began a project in 2010 to "reverse-engineer the Master of Divinity." Extensive collaboration between school and denominational leaders identified 27 competencies needed for effective ministry. The school adopted a "competency-based, direct assessment, in-context delivery model" that was variable in duration but consistent in required demonstration of mastery of the competencies. Three mentors guided and evaluated student progress and mastery of competencies—a faculty member, a denominational mentor, and a practicing pastor. The mentor team evaluated students' progress through each of the 27 competencies, and together, they determined mastery, allowing the student to advance in the program.

Sioux Falls instituted the most institutionally comprehensive redevelopment of all, utilizing CBTE for its educational programming and "cracking the credit hour" across

its systems.<sup>2</sup> The great majority of higher education institutions structure their faculty loads, courses, student billing, and graduation requirements on the basis of the credit hour as the "currency of the realm." Sioux Falls restructured these processes and policies around student educational needs, moving to a subscription model for

tuition (that reduced tuition charges by more than 70 percent), a leveled out administrative structure including staff training across different systems,

increased input from all administrators and staff, and faculty work across disciplines with workloads measured on the basis of work with students rather than credit hours taught.<sup>3</sup>

### **Reflections on outcomes**

Each school experienced a renewed appreciation for and a connection with their denominational sponsors. The processes of deep conversations and explorations of the competencies of ministry and the best ways of preparing ministers enriched the schools and, in certain ways, returned them to the foundations of their missions.

Each school reports greater educational effectiveness, with students better prepared to integrate their learning across traditional discipline lines, and to incorporate their learning into their ministries. In addition, their new models of education address the four dimensions of formation: intellectual, vocational, human, and spiritual, identified in the *ATS Standards of Accreditation*.<sup>4</sup>

All three schools also report stronger engagement in life-long learning, as many of the student cohorts

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2 See Amy Laitinen, "Cracking the Credit Hour," Sept. 5, 2012, *New America*. [https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/2334-cracking-the-credit-hour/Cracking\\_the\\_Credit\\_Hour\\_Sept5\\_0.ab0048b12824428cba568ca359017ba9.pdf](https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/2334-cracking-the-credit-hour/Cracking_the_Credit_Hour_Sept5_0.ab0048b12824428cba568ca359017ba9.pdf)

3 See the Kairos University blog that addresses multiple aspects of the development of Kairos, including the adoption of CBTE and administrative restructuring. <https://kairos.edu/engage/blog/>

4 Standard 3.1. <https://www.ats.edu/Standards-Of-Accreditation>

continue connections long after graduation, and mentors and students develop ongoing friendships.

Each of the schools has also experienced significantly greater economic stability and sustainability, in part because of enrollment growth, but also due to right sizing of the schools' operations and restructuring of administrative processes.

A recent ATS survey found that nearly three quarters of chief executive officers serving in ATS schools came to their roles holding PhD or ThD degrees. Slightly more than half had earned the MDiv, but less than 3 percent had earned the MBA, and fewer than 20 percent held a "professional" doctorate—a category that included the EdD, DMin, and MD, among others. Northwest's leaders came from the pastorate and from business.<sup>5</sup> Lexington's president earned an EdD and brought 25 years of higher education administrative experience to the role.<sup>6</sup> The president of Sioux Falls has an MBA and experience in institutional advancement, external relations, and enrollment management in a theological school.<sup>7</sup>

All the leaders brought significant courage to their work, knowing their schools needed to take substantial risks, and with the understanding that tough decisions and likely unpopular actions were essential for the schools' ongoing fulfilling of their missions. The solution to each school's challenges could not consist of simply doing more of the same and finding ways to do it better. These leaders knew that the game had to change.

Each school's mission was ultimately about students, and the institution had to serve student learning and formation. Each leader was tenacious in focusing on the school's mission and insisting that the institution serve the mission rather than adapting the mission to serve the institution's needs. Each built on important preparatory work done by predecessors, and understood that building

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5 Kent Anderson, president at Northwest Baptist Seminary for 26 years, earned the PhD, but came from a pastorate; Ruth McGillivray was a project manager and program evaluator with a major technology company.

6 Charisse Gillett became president of Lexington Theological Seminary in 2011.

7 Greg Henson became president of Sioux Falls Seminary in 2014.

relationships within the school was necessary for the institution to move forward.

A few final summary reflections emerged as fundamental and crucial in each case.

- The schools faced circumstances dramatic and urgent enough to make significant changes necessary.
- Each leader kept strict focus on the school's mission, especially as related to the effective education of students for ministry. The education had to be affordable and accessible, meeting students where they were, and launching them on a path of ongoing, life-long formation. Enrollment growth was important to fulfill the mission, but not the primary consideration.
- Leaders had to think in new ways about the educational, academic enterprise. This creative thinking may be somewhat more natural for those who come from something other than a traditional academic background.
- Leaders had to be courageous, ready to take risks with few, if any, previous examples of success.
- Each context included building close relationships with constituents, a willingness to listen and collaborate, a level of personal and institutional humility, and extensive collaborations with educational partners.
- Mentors for students played a key role in each school's newly-developed educational programming, and training of faculty and other mentors was crucial for all.
- Each of these programs stressed the integration of the four dimensions of learning and formation (intellectual, vocational, human, spiritual), with integration across academic disciplines and between academic learning and ministry.

Clearly, most schools will not move to a full-blown competency-based approach to education, nor should

they. But these three schools are examples of institutions needing and finding pathways to fulfill their missions, raising questions common to competency-based programs (that are important for all institutions to address), and—in each of these three cases—transforming their educational programs and institutional structures through CBTE.

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