

Guidelines on Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)

(Approved by ATS Board of Commissioners in January 2020, effective July 2020.

Revisions approved June 2023 and June 2024.)

NOTE: This document is a significant revision of CBE guidelines approved by the Board in 2016. It reflects input from the 2017 final report of the CB(T)E peer group in the Educational Models and Practices Project, as well as changes discussed with the Board in June 2019. These guidelines align with Standard 3.10, which continues the expectation of previous Standards to treat non-course/credit-based CBTE programs as experiments requiring Board approval. That standard's Self-Study Ideas specifically mention these guidelines to help schools seeking such approval (see also *Petition for Educational Experiment*). In addition, given the range of developments and activities related to CBTE in member schools, it is recommended that a petition to approve this delivery method be required for all schools implementing CBTE based on courses and credits to ensure that the requirement of all applicable standards are met (see also *Petition for Competency-based Theological Education—Course and Credit Based*).

Overview

Competency-based education (CBE) is both an educational philosophy and an academic model that “begins with the end in mind.” CBE programs work with key constituencies (internal and external) to develop a coherent set of competencies related to knowledge, skills, and behaviors that prepare graduates for particular professions. Unlike traditional education models, CBE programs hold “learning constant” while “time varies.” That means all students, regardless of how much or how little time it takes, must demonstrate mastery of every competency for their program. CBE programs help students master various competencies through a series of well-designed learning activities facilitated and approved by faculty that may or may not involve classroom time or traditional courses. Competency-based *theological* education (CBTE) is an approach to CBE that focuses on ministry or ministry-related professions for theological schools, with a special emphasis on human (character) and vocational (pastoral) formation.

CBE programs have existed for decades but have grown in popularity in recent years. For example, Western Governors University, begun in 1997, now enrolls more than 140,000 students in its CBE programs. In 2017, Queen's University in Ontario became the first in Canada to offer a CBE program in medical education. In the US, the Department of Education (USDE) categorizes CBE programs into three basic types: (1) those based on courses and/or credits, (2) those not based on courses or credits, called “direct assessment” programs, and (3) hybrid programs that are a blend of both. The first type does not require Department approval; the second and third types do if students are to be eligible for US Title IV financial aid.

CBTE programs are fairly new to theological schools but have drawn increasing interest among the ATS membership. As part of the Educational Models and Practices Project, a group of ten ATS schools met for several years to explore this approach to ministerial education. Findings from that peer group inform these guidelines. Two of the first ATS schools to implement CBTE programs were Northwest Seminary in Canada in 2013 and Sioux Falls Seminary in the US in 2014. Since Northwest's *Immerse* program is not based on courses or credits, it required approval as an experiment by the ATS Board of Commissioners. That approval was granted in 2014 for five years, which was changed in 2019 to ongoing approval as an exception to then Standard ES 1.6.1. Since Sioux Falls' *Kairos* MDiv program is based on courses and credits, it did not require special approval. However, when they expanded that CBTE program to include

all of their graduate programs (MDiv, MA and DMin) and eliminated the campus residency requirement, the school received approval by the Board in 2019 to offer all those CBTE programs as exceptions to residency. In 2017, the Board granted approval for Grace Theological Seminary to offer its CBTE MDiv and MA programs as a five-year experiment and in 2022 granted ongoing approval for the program as an exception to Standards 3.9-10. Their *Deploy* programs are not course or credit based and were the first ATS “direct assessment” CBTE programs granted approval by the USDE to be eligible for Title IV aid.

The continuing interest in CBTE among ATS schools led to the initiation of annual CBTE conferences, which are subsidized in part through ATS. The first was hosted in 2018 by Northwest Baptist Seminary and drew more than 100 participants, over half from ATS schools. From 2019 through 2023, CBTE conferences with tracks designed specifically for theological schools have been hosted by the Competency-Based Education Network at its annual conference, which draws hundreds of persons interested in CBE (and now CBTE).

Ten Factors in Evaluating CBTE Degree Programs

Any ATS Commission-accredited school planning to offer one or more degrees through competency-based theological education (CBTE) not based on courses or credits, either completely or as a hybrid, must submit a Petition for an Educational Experiment that, among other things, addresses the following ten factors (see *Commission Standard 3.10* and *Policies and Procedures*, IV.G). The school may not begin the program(s) until/unless it receives approval* from the ATS Board of Commissioners. Any ATS school offering a CBTE degree program that is based on courses and credits must petition for approval of this distinctive way of delivery, confirming that the school is approved to offer that degree, the degree meets all applicable *Commission Standards*, and how it meets these ten factors.

1. *A rationale for the CBTE program*, including what needs it will meet, how it aligns with the school’s mission, and a succinct description of the program (see Standard 1.1).
2. *A list of clearly articulated competencies* for the CBTE program, which align with the expectations of the applicable degree program standards. The proposal must include competency definitions and behavioral-based performance indicators potential graduates must demonstrate in order to earn the desired credential. The proposal must describe structured learning activities designed, reviewed, and approved by faculty to help students move from their current levels of performance utilizing new learning to achieve intended outcomes. The proposal must describe what learning activities will be associated with each competency, such as seminars, synchronous or asynchronous online sessions, reading and writing assignments, exams, ministry activities, study groups, mentoring sessions, church-based activities, etc. (see Standards 3, 4, and 5).
3. *A summary of how those competencies were developed*, including the involvement of faculty and other professionals (e.g., church leaders), with some indication that graduates of the program will find appropriate placements (see Standards 7.10-11 and 8.8).
4. *A coherent plan for assessing those competencies*, using performance-based assessment tools including direct and indirect measures, as well as clear rubrics and benchmarks, that are aligned with criteria named in expected outcomes and with the expectation that students will demonstrate a pre-determined level of achievement (mastery) of all competencies before any degree is awarded (see Standards 2.5-6).

5. *Involvement of qualified faculty* who are engaged in design, delivery, and oversight of program content and in evaluation of how and how well the competencies are achieved, as well as other persons or agencies involved in student evaluations. The petition must list what faculty and others will be involved, their roles, specific activities, and qualifications (see Standard 8).
6. *Regular and substantive interaction between qualified faculty and students, as well as among a viable student community of learning*, since CBTE is not a form of correspondence education (not allowed under ATS Commission Standards); see Standard 3.9 for requirements for “regular and substantive interaction.”
7. *Clarity on how, where, and when the program will be delivered*, with attention to issues of location (e.g., onsite, offsite, online), of building a community of learning, and of degree length (how long it will typically take to complete). If the program is to be offered in other countries and/or other languages, describe the school’s resources and capacities to support students in those other countries and/or other languages (see Standard 1.4).
8. *Due attention to formation*, including—as appropriate to the degree—intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational formation, as well as how any required supervised ministry experiences will be provided and evaluated. The petition must describe both a) how students in the program will be mentored, and b) the training, development, and ongoing evaluation of mentors to ensure consistency in mentoring and achievement of outcomes (see Standard 3.1).
9. *Description of support services and resources* that will be available to students, including library services and resources, technology services and resources, and student services and resources, and how those will be delivered, as well as the qualifications of those delivering those resources and services (see Standards 6.2, 7.5, and 10.9).
10. *Description of how the CBTE program meets graduate-level workload expectations*, i.e., that the work required and the outcomes achieved are comparable to current generally accepted standards of graduate education, e.g., the normal expectations and calculations used for credit hours. A CBTE program must demonstrate that it has appropriate rigor and quality consistent with the norms of graduate theological education and with the ATS Commission *Standards of Accreditation* (see Standard 3.2).

*NOTE: Any Title IV school approved to offer CBTE programs not based on courses or credits must also seek and receive approval from the USDE if it desires Title IV eligibility for those students.