

Guidelines on Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)

Approved by the Board of Commissioners of the ATS, June 2026.

NOTE: This document serves as a guide for CBTE programs based on course and/or credits and approved by the Board of Commissioners. It reflects guidelines originally created in 2016 with subsequent revisions.

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 150,000 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 United States, 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. Schools pursuing direct assessment programs should see the Commission-approved Guidelines for Direct Assessment.

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 Commission-accredited schools met for several years to explore this approach to ministerial education. Findings from that peer group inform these guidelines. Two of the first Commission-accredited 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 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, under the current *Commission Policies and Procedures*, a petition to offer more than 50 percent of a program via CBTE is needed. 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 Commission-approved “direct assessment” CBTE programs granted approval by the USDE to be eligible for Title IV aid.

The continuing interest in CBTE among Commission-accredited 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 Commission-accredited schools. These annual gatherings have continued and are now coordinated by the [CBTE Community of Practice](#).

Eleven Factors in Evaluating CBTE Degree Programs

Any Commission-accredited school offering half or more of a CBTE degree program that is based on courses and/or 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 eleven factors. Schools offering between 25 and 49 percent of a program based on courses and/or credits must submit a notification form (see *Petition for Substantive Change in Degree Program* and *Notification Related to Degree Program* on the ATS.edu website).

1. *A rationale for the CBTE program*, including what needs it will meet and how it will demonstrate student achievement, 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, documented instructional engagement, learning outcomes that students must attain to be awarded the credential, feedback cycles that document ongoing formation, 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 faculty-designed developmental learning pathways including the learning activities 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*, based on the institution's established program and process of evaluation, including direct and indirect measures and especially performance-based assessment tools, as well as clear rubrics and benchmarks, that are aligned with criteria named in expected outcomes. "Mastery" should be clearly defined with the expectation that students will demonstrate a pre-determined level of achievement of all competencies before any degree is awarded. Evaluation also ensures regular review of CBTE programs describing how evidence is documented, how consistency is assured, and identification of any areas of weakness in order to make immediate improvements (see Standards 2.5-6).
5. *Involvement of qualified faculty* with appropriate subject matter expertise who are engaged in design, delivery, and oversight of program content as well as evaluation of how and how well the competencies are achieved, along with other persons or agencies involved in student evaluations. The petition must list faculty and others who will be involved, their roles, specific activities, and qualifications. While those other than faculty may be assigned important roles in supporting or assisting students, they must not replace the essential role of faculty or instructors (see Standard 8).

6. *Regular and substantive interaction between qualified faculty and students, as well as among a viable student community of learning.* CBTE is not a form of correspondence education (not allowed under *Commission Standards*) but requires faculty-guided learning through intentionally designed learning activities, as well as faculty mentoring of student progress (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. *Distinction between competencies awarded through prior learning assessment* from those earned through CBTE. A system is in place that records any competencies awarded at the outset of the program through *prior learning assessment* and describes the process and criteria for determining such an award, as well as making clear what remains to be learned by each student enrolled in the program. Transcripts clearly distinguish between competencies awarded through prior learning assessment and those earned through the CBTE program (see Standards 3.13, 7.4, and 7.7).
9. *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) document the training, development, and ongoing evaluation of mentors to ensure consistency in mentoring, assessment of student work, and achievement of outcomes (see Standard 3.1).
10. *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).
11. *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 and/or class hours. A CBTE program must demonstrate that it has appropriate rigor and quality consistent with the norms of graduate theological education and with the *Commission Standards of Accreditation*. All such programs should demonstrate intentional developmental progression from introductory to advanced levels of competency performance (see Standard 3.2).