Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education
Competency-Based Education Final Peer Group Report

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"Let's Begin with the End in Mind"
Competency-Based Theological Education

Competency-based theological education (CBTE) is an educational model that emphasizes: (1) learning more than "seat time," (2) the mastery of professionally-oriented competencies, (3) well-planned learning activities or assessments (class-based or not, online or onsite) that students may complete at their own paces, and (4) a community of learning where regular and substantive interaction occurs between qualified faculty and students. CBTE programs may be course/credit-based or non-course/credit-based or both. One way to compare and contrast CBTE with more traditional educational models is that the CBTE model holds learning constant while time varies, whereas traditional models hold time constant while learning varies.

As we have progressed through this project, we have come to realize CBTE is more than merely a model to replicate. It is a value system that forms a foundation for a renewed approach to theological education. As evidence of this, two of the ten schools in our CBTE peer group have been approved by the ATS Commission on Accrediting for non-credit/course-based CBTE programs as five-year experiments: Northwest Baptist Seminary in June 2014 and Grace Theological Seminary in February 2017. A third school (Sioux Falls Seminary) operates a CBTE program that is essentially course/credit-based and does not require the approval of ATS, regional accreditors, or the United States Department of Education (DOE). *(For a side-by-side comparison of the three schools, see the last page of this report.)*

Clearly, schools can deliver programs rooted in a CBTE value system in different ways. At the same time, all three of the programs in our peer group share a similar set of underlying values that form the foundation for their approaches to theological education. This value system calls us to think of theological education not as a transcendent *form* of education (graduate-level, traditional courses and credits, residency requirements) but as a transcendent *function* of education. As such, it needs to reinterpret itself from setting to setting to optimally fulfill its function.

We recognize CBTE as a movement that has outgrown "niche" status and rapidly is gaining traction in higher education. More than 600 institutions have some form in place; however, we're convinced that one size doesn't fit all, and that prevents our schools from blindly joining the wave. Not only does theological education in general have unique characteristics and requirements, but individual schools within the theological education world have distinct characteristics and requirements. Seminaries that embrace CBTE need to consider its underlying value system and discern if it fits in their contexts. CBTE may require schools to raise the value they place on certain aspects of theological education while lowering the value for other aspects. Member schools also must allow for differences that arise among sister schools that implement CBTE programs.

The goal of our research is two-fold: to help seminaries determine if CBTE is right for them; and to help seminaries design and initiate CBTE programs that support their missions, meet the needs of their constituents, and follow best principles and practices for ATS member schools.

Common Characteristics

Three characteristics are fundamental to all CBTE programs, especially in a theological, ministerial setting. In no particular order, competency-based education is:

- **Customized.** Students work with teams assembled and overseen by a credentialed member of the faculty. This team creates a unique pathway through the degree using resources inside and outside the seminary. The path follows no predetermined route. Students pursue competencies at their own paces and in their chosen orders.

- **Communal.** Students travel the path in the company of peers and mentors. Interactions are substantive and occur in a secure and private environment, although contact is not always face-to-face. To help participants bond with one another, the seminary may form affinity groups, with members sharing the same faculty mentor or coming from the same denomination. Credentialed faculty initiate and engage in dialogue that addresses content related to the competencies.

- **Contextualized.** The ministry context of a student is intentional and integrated into the educational process, the design of assignments, and the assessment of learning. The context helps shape the journey and may result in students enrolled in the same degree program completing different sets of assignments.

The role of faculty is less about creating and imparting content and more about helping students navigate content, acquire knowledge, master skills, and think theologically. In CBTE, learning is constant, whereas "seat time" varies. Inputs are flexible; outcomes are fixed. Competencies that students master typically include knowledge of their traditions' theologies; the ability to interpret and apply biblical text; proficiency in performing key ministerial duties; and personal and spiritual formation. Beyond these expectations, a school can add any number of competencies that address constituents' needs. For example, MDiv students at Northwest Baptist Seminary must achieve 27 outcomes, each with academic and practical components. Among the 27 outcomes are the four content areas that the ATS Commission on Standards of Accreditation requires: religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.

Regardless of the number or nature of the competencies, each one must lend itself to assessment. A school's assessment strategy begins at the design stage, continues with the assignment and collection of artifacts, and culminates in the interpretation of the artifacts. Almost everything in a CBTE program is anchored in assessment.

A team of experts is responsible for overseeing and measuring a student's progress through a degree program. This team is composed of faculty, administrators, and constituency representatives, some of whom may lack terminal degrees but excel in a given competency unit. The team monitors and assesses the student's performance in activities that go beyond standardized tests and paper-writing. Creative curricula may call for artifacts such as videos, structured interviews, debates, group projects, role-playing situations, and journal entries.

Peer group insights: Because assessment is at the heart of CBTE, training in assessment protocols is essential. Mentors decide by consensus if students have mastered the competencies in question; therefore, they must follow the same evaluation guidelines. As CBTE becomes more widespread among theological schools, a preferred lexicon must emerge so all parties speak the same language. Common terminology will promote consistency in student evaluation, program assessment, and mentors' performance.

For example, defining with precision the meaning of "substantive interaction" will help students and mentors understand the frequency and depth of communication expected of them. We, as a group, endorse the following definition of substantive interaction:

> *Regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students means frequent dialogue initiated and pursued by credentialed faculty and responded to by students in a timely manner. The exchange should address substantive content related to the competency/competencies that the students are learning.*

The Financial Impact of CBTE

CBTE is still a work in progress. Proponents might say we're breaking new ground, whereas opponents might argue that we're flying a plane as we build it. Both observations are correct. Two things are certain. First, schools may know they *need* to change but they may be *unwilling* to change. Second, CBTE is not a silver bullet that dramatically increases enrollment, decreases costs, and solves all problems related to educating pastors in the twenty-first century. But it does offer a new way of thinking about how we design our educational, financial, and operational models. Among innovations that CBTE encourages schools to explore are the following:

Tuition structure

- **CBTE may take one of two forms.** The first is credit/course-based; the second is non-credit/course-based. While the first form plays down the role of the credit hour, the second form eliminates it almost entirely. In those senses, the credit hour is no longer the coin of the realm in CBTE programs.
- **Students pay a subscription fee.** The fee may be paid monthly, per semester, or per year and is unrelated to credit hours. This creates a more predictable cash flow for the school.
- **Instruction costs vary.** Mentors' compensation is determined by the number of students assigned to them. Faculty workload no longer is articulated in credit hours.
- **Schools move away from FTE tracking.** CBTE allows schools to move toward developing new metrics for projecting revenue rather than using FTE as a financial planning or enrollment tracking tool.
- **Student registration is streamlined.** CBTE lends itself to automated registration, which requires fewer staff hours and results in heightened efficiency.
- **Student advising is less burdensome.** CBTE relies on mentors whose role is not to tell students which courses to take and in what order to take them; instead, mentors walk alongside students and offer support and guidance. This frees faculty for other tasks.
- **Institutional financial aid can become a tool.** Rather than basing financial aid on enrollment status, schools can use it as an enrollment management tool or eliminate it if they are able to reduce the costs of tuition dramatically.
- **Partnership possibilities increase.** CBTE creates opportunities for collaboration within the church and beyond. Because more focus is on the outcomes of the educational process rather than the process itself, seminaries can become platforms that connect students to multiple learning experiences on and off campus.

Peer group insights: Implementing a CBTE program or a CBTE track within an existing degree program does not mandate that schools abandon their traditional business practices, but it allows them to do so. Moving away from credit hours is more a shift in philosophy and how we understand the structure and flow of education. It's a new philosophy that provides a fresh perspective on what should drive the educational journey and enterprise model. If member schools with CBTE programs want students in non-credit/course-based programs to be eligible for USDE Title IV loans, then they must also petition for approval from the USDE.

Challenges to Overcome

CBTE requires a certain amount of upfront investment, part of which supports technology upgrades. Essential to the CBTE model is a highly specialized learning management system. Whereas several tech companies—Brightspace, Fidelis, and Brainstorm among them—are developing products to meet the emerging CBTE market, no "perfect" platform exists. At least not yet. To compensate, some schools have tweaked familiar platforms such as Wordpress or Google Docs to meet their needs. Others have cobbled together bits and pieces of existing programs with mixed results. Northwest Baptist Seminary and Sioux Falls Seminary currently are working together to market and make available a platform that can serve seminaries and the wider church. Their partnership will combine the proven practices and technological engines behind the schools' successful Immerse and Kairos CBTE programs. The result will be a platform specifically designed for CBTE. Whatever system an institution chooses, that system needs to provide five services:

- Produce a digital record of learning that justifies student grades
- Ensure a secure environment for mentor/student interaction
- Offer elongated schedules to accommodate learning that doesn't fit rigid timeframes
- Help students plan and track progress as they navigate the complex structure
- Allow mentors to customize learning for students based on individual variables

A sophisticated learning management system more than pays for itself over the long term because it enables a school to engage in predictive analytics. This means the school has the capacity to run algorithms through a sea of data—not just a sample—looking for patterns and connections. Like pilots rely on their instruments to fly, schools rely on analytics to plan programs, track progress, predict outcomes, and prevent missteps. This is possible because the learning management system collects data 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The longer a school implements CBTE, the more data it amasses and the more reliable its analytics.

An example of the practical applications of this capability would be that predictive analytics can help a school improve student retention by having its learning management system comb through data, red-flagging the presence of indicators common to students who have dropped out. The information enables a school to predict with great accuracy the likelihood that a current (or even a future) student will drop out. The sooner the school makes that prediction, the sooner it can step in and work with the student to reduce the flight risk.

Data analytics also has application in a seminary's marketing and admission processes, donor development efforts, and in tracking a student's progress toward mastering a certain competency. It can measure the amount of time spent on a task, the rapidity of responses, the level and quality of participation in discussions, and the amount of time each mentor is spending reviewing performance. Whereas data analytics is particularly effective within the CBTE format, it is a valuable tool in all traditional and nontraditional formats. For schools that lack risk capital, it reduces the chances of making costly mistakes.

As an interesting side note, a 2016 study of four higher-education institutions (none was a seminary) revealed that three of the four expect their CBE programs to break even within five years of launch; by the sixth year, all four schools project that their CBE programs will be operating at half the cost of their traditional programs.

Peer group insights: Schools that lack in-house technical expertise will have to either create staff positions or rely on outside providers for ongoing maintenance and management of their software systems. Of some concern: The concept of data collection and predictive analytics raises an ethical question related to the private online interactions between students and mentors. Should such conversations be excluded from routine data collection and analysis? The solution may be as simple as giving students the opportunity to "opt-in" or "opt-out" of some aspects of data collection.

Next Steps: Recommendations

From our experience, CBTE has the potential to revitalize a seminary's connection with its constituencies, create an educational pathway that is more affordable for students and less expensive to operate, and touch on a felt need within the church. But to fully realize this potential, we believe schools need to consider a series of shifts as they take steps toward initiating CBTE programs. We offer the following recommendations:

- **The school-network connection.** We need to begin to see theological education as something that flows out of the church and/or context rather than something that simply serves the church or context. A school that implements CBTE must work hand-in-hand with ministry practitioners and local contexts to plan, prepare, and assess education. This creates a need to ensure that church-based mentors fully understand and appreciate the importance of accreditation standards.
- **Content as subservient to outcomes.** While content is important and education without content is formless, we can't allow it to govern our measurements of success. Outcomes become the primary focus of the educational journey and replace content as the orienting purpose of a degree.
- **Data pool expansion.** The value of predictive analytics could soar if schools were to pool the data that their learning management systems collect. CBTE has the capability to foster collaboration among theological schools on issues as broad as collective licensing of learning systems, shared faculty development, and assessment practices.
- **Global expansion.** Many schools have significant foreign enrollment; others have extension campuses off shore. How well CBTE might serve persons from other cultures is undetermined. This deserves further examination.

- **Educational effectiveness.** Certainly the most important "unknown" is how CBTE's educational effectiveness stacks up against more traditional education models over the long haul. Any attempts to report percentages related to graduation, placement, and long-term success in the field are premature. However, Northwest Baptist Seminary—with the longest CBTE track record of any ATS school—graduated 14 students in 2017, and its retention rate is higher than the norm. Sioux Falls Seminary has graduated six in its CBTE program and has decreased student debt by 67 percent in three years. CBTE enrollment is growing and CBTE programs are earning high marks from relevant constituents. Extensive data collection will confirm the educational effectiveness of CBTE and also will help fine-tune existing programs as well as meet ATS requirements.

	Grace Theological Seminary *Deploy*	**Northwest Baptist Seminary** *Immerse*	**Sioux Falls Seminary** *Kairos*
Program Content/ Curriculum Distinctives	❖ Integrated Outcomes Curriculum ❖ Mastery Model ❖ 18 Competencies (MDiv) ❖ 15 Competencies (MA) ❖ 4 Resource Modules	❖ Integrated Outcomes Curriculum ❖ Non-Linear (as compared to term-based) ❖ Mastery Model ❖ 27 Ministry Leadership Outcomes (collaboratively defined with client network) ❖ Adaptable Outcome Development Assignments ❖ 16 Instructional Seminars delivered quarterly	❖ Integrated outcomes curriculum ❖ Mastery model ❖ Non-linear ❖ 9 Outcomes (MDiv), holding a total of 170 targets (competencies) and 9 master assignments (summative assessments) ❖ Equivalency between clusters of targets and traditional courses ❖ Interchangeable systems of targets and credit hours ❖ Six on-campus intensives are required
Methodology Distinctives	❖ Two mentors for each student (Ministry mentor and Formation mentor) ❖ In-Ministry context ❖ Network, not student-driven ❖ Academic, doctoral credentialed faculty member for each student	❖ Mentored Mastery o Mentored Learning o Required Mentor Training ❖ In-Ministry Context ❖ Strategic Partnerships ❖ Network, not student driven ❖ 3 Person Mentor Teams per student *Academic *Ministry/Pastoral *Network/Denomination	❖ Three mentors per student (faculty, personal, ministry) ❖ Whole curriculum may be done in ministry context, overseen by mentor team; traditional courses may be substituted ❖ Each assignment (except the master assignments) may be adapted ❖ Student-driven
Technology	❖ Moodle Platform ❖ Logos Bible Software (Gold, customized package)	❖ NBS Custom Designed Online Student Portfolio * "Silo"ed Individual student and Mentor Team record of learning *Objective Outcome *Assessment Rubrics *Metrics for Program Analytics and Student Support	❖ Google Drive (houses student portfolio) ❖ Moodle (houses resources)
Finance	❖ Tuition: Semester block-pricing ❖ Logos Bible Software rolled into tuition ❖ Applying for Title IV financial aid	❖ Tuition: Annual Subscription *Annual Mentor Stipend *Additional Instructional Seminar Fees *Additional Mentor Community and Training Fees	❖ Monthly subscription service ❖ Monthly faculty mentor stipend for non-core faculty
Additional Information	❖ ATS accredited ❖ HLC accredited (pending)	❖ ATS accredited	❖ ATS accredited, HLC accredited and approved for Title IV

Appendix

**Summary of Educational Principles and Practices
for Competency-Based Theological Education**

Definition

Competency-based theological education (CBTE):

- is grounded in the theological and ecclesiastical values, practices, and competencies required by institutions and organizations that will be served by graduates,
- allows students to progress at their own paces to achieve mastery of identified competencies,
- may be based on credit equivalencies or utilize direct assessment, and
- is facilitated by regular and substantive interaction with faculty as well as mentors and others involved in the educational process, including the robust community of learners.

Educational Design, Resources, and Institutional Procedures

As with other models of educational programming, competency-based theological education will:

- be designed so that the mastery of competencies follows careful curricular design and models educational coherence,
- include all areas of learning appropriate to particular degree programs, with coherent plans for demonstration of mastery of competencies,
- utilize resources appropriate to the program, including faculty, practitioners, mentors, and other learning partners, all of whom are verified by the school as having credentials and skills appropriate to the educational process,
- provide access to library resources needed to support the educational programming,
- be supported by technical support services, such as a learning management system capable of providing reliable and current records of student progress, faculty and mentor feedback, and findings of assessment tools,
- support faculty in adapting to and facilitating the distinctive character of CBTE,
- develop effective administrative structures and training for administrative personnel to support CBTE,
- be periodically reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness, and
- be presented accurately in publicity, including descriptions of the skills needed for student success.