

# KAIROS AS A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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*Written by Greg Henson, President, Sioux Falls Seminary*

# KAIROS EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY - INTRODUCTION

Most of the world of higher education refers to what we do as “competency-based education.” We tend to call what we do “competency-based *theological* education” because we want to highlight some of the formative and integrative aspects of the educational journey. It could be that we are creating something new. That doesn’t mean, however, that our approach to theological education appeared out of thin air! Like all things, it can be traced through a narrative.

## **From Outcome-Based Education (OBE) to Competency-Based Education (CBE)**

Around the 1950s and 60s, the world of education in the United States began to think more about the point of education. Up until that time, modern higher education tended to have a bit of an “assembly line” feel. Eventually, educators began to talk about the need for outcome-based education. The idea was to put a heavy focus on the actual results of educational journeys rather than simply assuming the journey did what it was presumed to do.

One of the offspring of this philosophy was competency-based education. It got its start around the 1970s. Rather than using courses to measure progress or to structure educational journeys, programs were structured around discrete competencies that could be demonstrated by the student. Today, some of the most prominent or well-known systems of competency-based education are run by places like Western Governors University or Southern New Hampshire University. While they are the most known, they are not the only people doing it. In fact, there are several schools engaged in competency-based education and they often do things a bit differently based on their context. Thousands of students all over the world are engaged in competency-based education. [Back to top.](#)

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## **EXPLORING OBE & CBE**

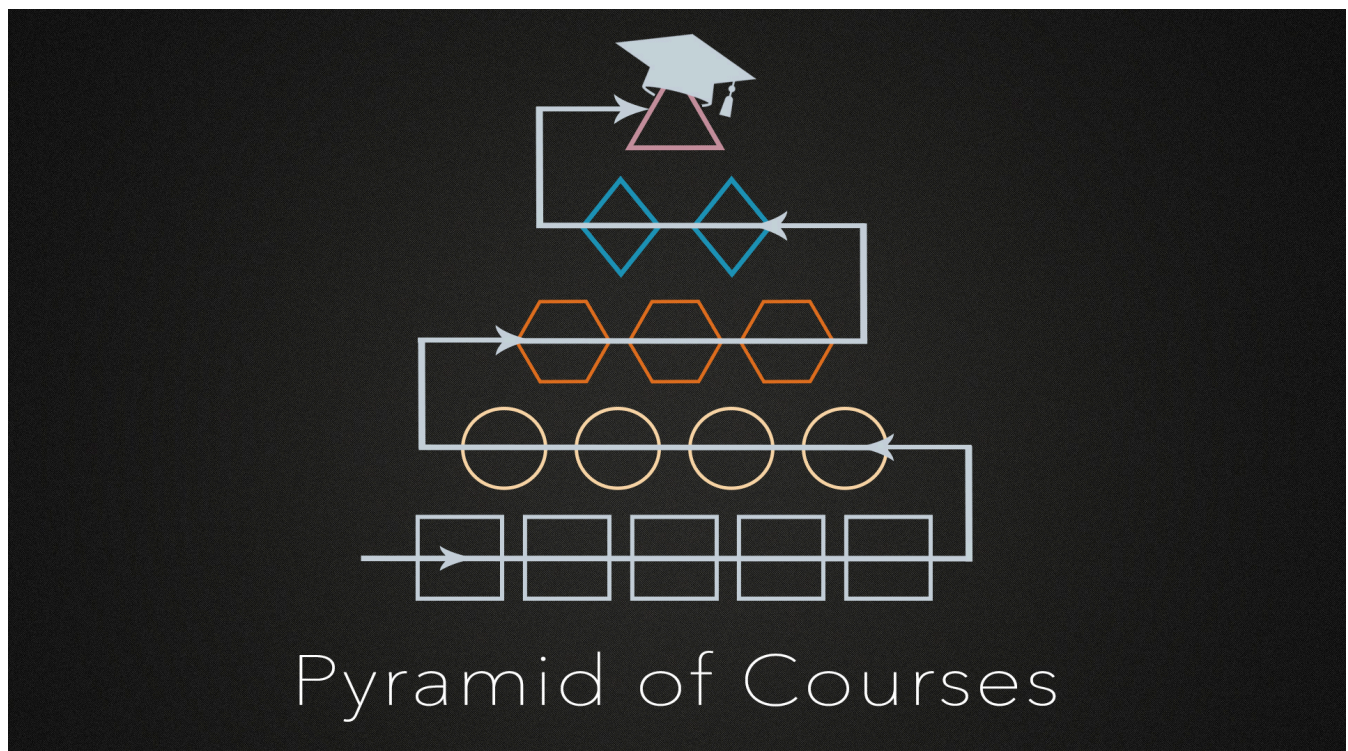
Throughout this white paper, we will explain why the common understanding of “competency-based education” may not be the best way to describe what Kairos is doing. To get started, we will take a deeper look at outcome-based and competency-based education, why they begin with the end in mind, and how that differs from the approach often taken in modern higher education.

## The Gravitational Pull of Reductionism

There are very good things about outcome-based and competency-based education. Beginning with the end in mind is usually a good way to begin a process (Luke 14:28-30). In our experience, the challenge is that modern higher education has an extremely strong gravitational pull toward reductionism. We tend to think that if a larger process is broken down into its component parts then, when we put all of those parts back together, we will have the whole. This line of thought happens with everything from software design to biblical study to educational program design. The problem, however, is that it never actually works that way. By separating something into its component parts, we lose something very important. The things we lose vary based on the topic at hand but, in general, we lose the fact that the work of integration actually changes each and every component in some way. Let's take a look at how that works in education.

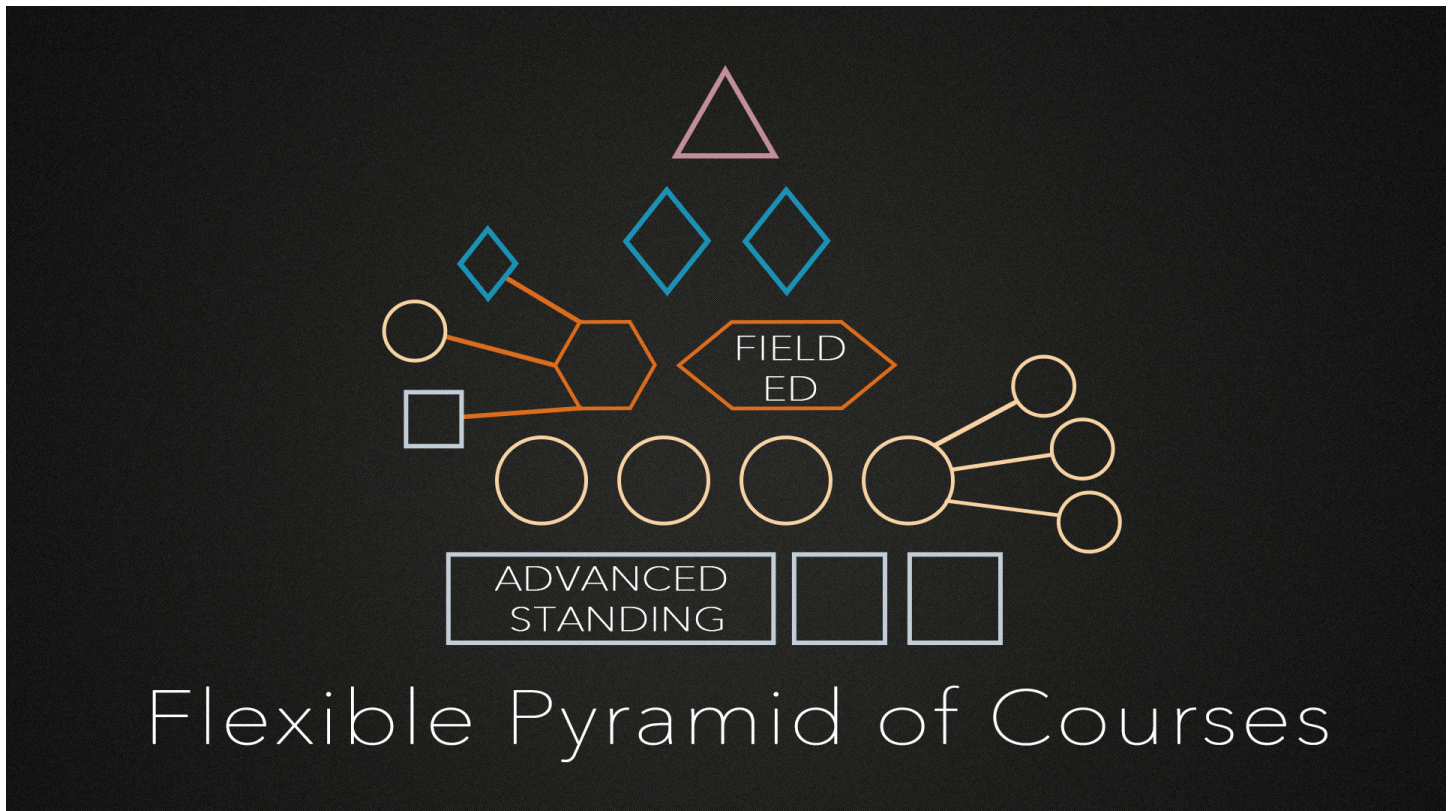
## The Pyramid of Courses

For most of the history of modern higher education, we have built programs using what I call a pyramid of courses. We line up a series of courses, one building on the other (or so it seems), and then invite learners to progress through those courses in a very particular order. Provided the student passes a course, which usually means they didn't fail it, the student moves along until each course has been completed. At which point the student is awarded a degree. It looks something like this.



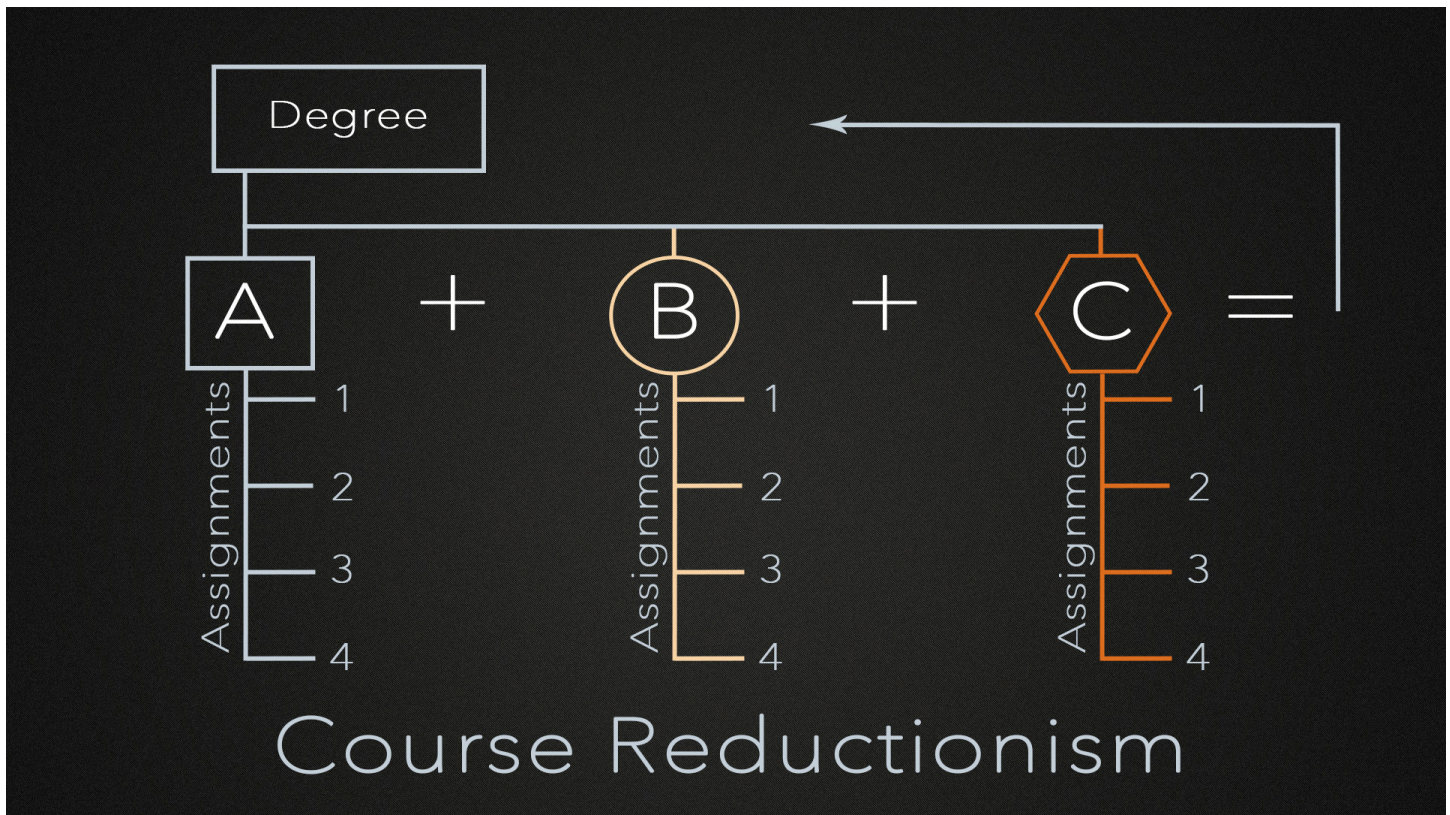


Over the years, we have worked hard to make this pyramid as flexible as possible. We used things like advanced standing, electives, and field education to allow students to slightly adapt their journey. I call this the flexible pyramid.



Unfortunately, the pyramid of courses approach structured education around the idea that a degree could be divided into its component parts (courses) and when put together they would create a fully orb ed educational experience. We would attempt to integrate thinking and processes by creating courses like “Integrative Seminar” or “Integrating Theology and Practice.” While these are good efforts, the need for them seems to confirm that the process itself is not inherently integrative. As a result, the educational journey tends to result in an equation that looks something like this: Complete Course A + Complete Course B + Complete Course C = Earn Degree.

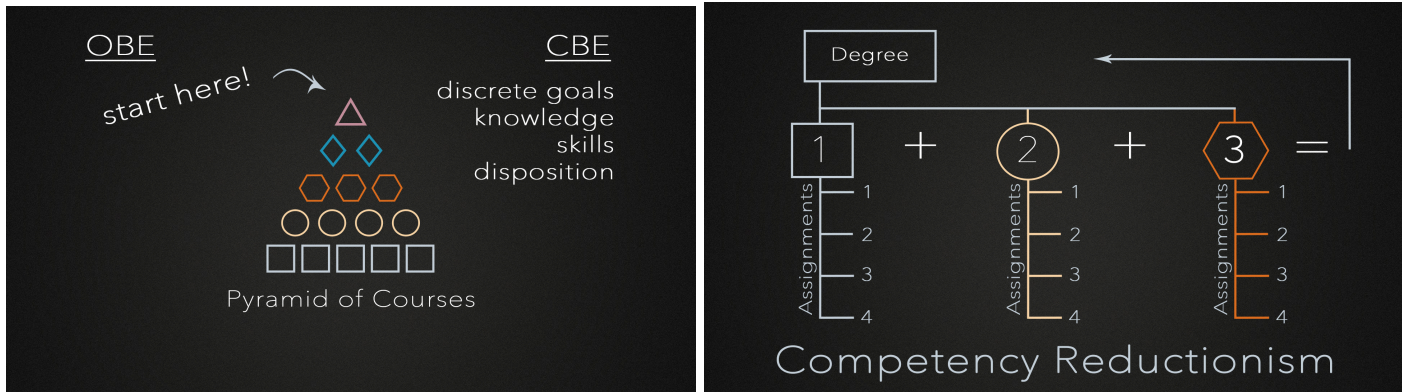




Obviously, this is a truncated explanation of the process, and I am sure there are pieces that could be nuanced in ways I have not and probably could not. My point, however, is to share the educational paradigm that led to outcome-based education (OBE) and eventually competency-based education (CBE). As educators were looking at this pyramid of courses and the reductionistic equation they were using for program design, they began to call attention to the fact that these processes were not producing consistent results. In short, the assembly line approach which worked so well in factories did not work well in human development. That is when they began to focus on outcomes and to kind of reverse engineer programs – they began with the end in mind.

CBE took this one step farther by inviting new voices to contribute to the program design process. Educators worked with employers, faculty, governments, and more to identify competencies that are needed. Then they began to build programs in light of those competencies, again beginning with the end in mind. The challenge, however, is that the underlying philosophy hadn't changed. We were still working with a potentially flawed understanding of human development. We still assumed that humans develop in some sort of linear fashion. As a result, what was a pyramid of courses became, in my opinion, a pyramid of competencies. While we may have developed better educational journeys and more practical ways for students to demonstrate learning (both of which are very good), we were still asking students to progress through a standardized curriculum that had been built using component parts. Thus, CBE could end up using the same pyramid and the same

equation.



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## FROM CBE TO CBTE

Kairos is an attempt at approaching learning in a way that invites us to reconsider not only the structure of learning (i.e. the delivery method) but also the philosophy that undergirds it. Our prayer from the beginning has been to envision theological education as a non-linear, messy, organic, and transformational journey of discipleship. In this approach, the work of integration is meant to be the very thing that drives the journey rather than something we work on at certain points along the way or in certain outcomes or competencies. As such, Kairos is not strictly a competency-based education program focused on developing discrete competencies – though we do care about discrete competencies. It is also not strictly an outcome-based education program focused on aetheral program outcomes, what one critic called “inane counting exercises involving meaningless phantom creatures (see Robert Shireman’s article “SLO Madness” in the April 7, 2016, issue of Inside Higher Ed) – though we do care about discrete outcomes, as well.

Instead, Kairos seeks to embrace the reality that following Jesus requires us to see how each part of our lives is deeply connected to the other. How we see, understand, and practice those connections will be deeply impacted by our faith tradition, context, vocation, formational history, and much more. As a result, we need a journey of discipleship – a journey of human development – that empowers followers of Jesus to flourish in their vocations, whatever those may be.

This is what many people call competency-based theological education. We define Competency-based education as an approach to education in which learner formation is rooted in contextualized standards of

excellence, shaped by the recognition that the act of knowing requires the integration of content, character, and craft, and evaluated in the context of team-based mentoring. Therefore, learner progression is marked by the observable demonstration of integrated knowing (rather than by time, input, curricular stages, etc.) and quality is measured by learner outcomes (rather than assumed based on the path, resources, or people engaged in the formational journey). By using this definition, we are drawing attention to the fact that emphasis is placed on demonstrated proficiency AND on the fact that the educational journey is a formational endeavor. God is at work in the world and in the lives of those who call Jesus Lord. In short, competency-based theological education is a formational journey as much as it is an educational one. [Back to top.](#)

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## PRINCIPLES OF CBTE

Several schools within the Association of Theological Education are attempting to live into this new reality. Currently, Kairos is the most widely distributed community of learning built around the concepts of CBTE. Now that we have been doing this for the better part of a decade, we have learned a bit about how this works in practice. It has helped to have conversation partners along the way. One conversation partner has been Kent Anderson and his team at Northwest Seminary and College in Vancouver, BC.

The Immerse program at Northwest shares some of the same impulses as Kairos. As such, Kent and I have been able to learn from, challenge, and support each other over the past several years. One of our goals has been to develop a series of CBTE principles. It seems that CBTE programs could be based on the following attributes: collaborative mission, contextual discipleship, integrated outcomes, customized proficiency, mentored teamwork, and holistic assessment.

**Collaborative Mission:** The work of CBTE should involve voices outside the walls of any institution. In short, the mission is simply the Great Commission, and all of us (churches, denominations, businesses, educators, administrators, parachurch organizations, etc.) are working together.

**Contextual Discipleship:** Followers of Jesus are developed within a particular context and that context should inform and shape the journey.

**Integrated Outcomes:** Nothing in a CBTE program is “discrete” in the sense that it can be viewed entirely separate from anything else. As such, the outcomes are the telos not the discrete competencies (or “targets” in Kairos).



**Customized Proficiency:** Since everything is integrated and discipleship is contextual, definitions of proficiency must be customized as well (i.e. standards of excellence are contextualized).

**Mentored Teamwork:** Discipleship happens in community, and relationships carry more authority than roles. That means mentor teams co-learn alongside students.

**Holistic Assessment:** If we are using integrated outcomes then we must assess everything in a holistic fashion, meaning we need to consider proficiency of content, character, and craft as a collective whole. [Back to top](#).

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## PRACTICES OF CBTE

Just like the educational journey is fully integrated (whether we want to believe it is or not), organizational systems are as well. That means that the principles of CBTE must be supported by organizational practices that reinforce the principles. In our experiences over the past decade, it seems as though these are important practices to consider.

**Collaborative Governance:** The traditional approaches to governance in higher education will not support CBTE well. Instead, we need to build trust and empower voices that were once not welcome at the “governance table” in seminaries.

**Unified Systems:** Everything from the way a school thinks about transcripts to the way it sends emails to faculty, staff, board members, and students is inextricably linked. We need to build systems that embrace this reality.

**Flexible Technology:** The technology we use and the way we choose to use it must be as flexible as the educational journey is for students.

**Affordable Programs:** Scholarships do not make education affordable because they shift the burden of cost to other parts of the church. If CBTE is really just collaborative participation in the Great Commission, we must create programs that are inherently inexpensive to operate.

**Ongoing Iteration:** CBTE organizations will recognize that ongoing and unending change is a natural byproduct of being Spirit-led. That is to say that CBTE will invite practices that allow for, and even encourage, ongoing improvement.



**Quality Framework:** To manage all of this well, a CBTE system will need to articulate its understanding of quality and then develop a framework that allows this understanding to be lived out in practice. For example, if standards of excellence are contextually defined, what process will a CBTE program use to create these definitions?

### **Moving Forward**

Taken together, the principles and practices are intended to create a platform on which a vast array of discipleship journeys can be built. From stewarding followers of Jesus who flourish as pastors or parachurch leaders to those who thrive as software engineers, real estate agents, and financial planners, CBTE programs have the potential to create fresh expressions of education that (hopefully) move us toward integrative living.

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