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PRACTICES OF CBTE

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PRACTICES OF CBTE: AFFORDABLE PROGRAMS

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).

For a school to engage in this approach to learning it must consider the organizational practices that will support it. In the pages that follow, we describe the six organizational practices that create fertile soil for CBTE. Taken together, these 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 stewarding those who thrive as software engineers, real estate agents, and financial planners, CBTE programs have the potential to create fresh expressions of education that move us toward integrative living as citizens of the Kingdom.

The six practices are: (1) Affordable Programs, (2), Unified Systems, (3) Flexible Technology, (4) Collaborative Governance, (5) Ongoing Iteration, and (6) Quality Framework. Today, we are going to look at the practice of affordable programs.

When we talk about affordability, we tend to speak in terms of what a student pays. To address affordability issues then we raise funds to provide scholarships. But what every president knows is that this doesn't really address the affordability of education, only the cost to students. Providing scholarships simply shifts the burden of cost to other parts of the church. Since CBTE is at its core collaborative participation in the Great Commission, we must create programs that are inherently less expensive to operate and which encourage more faithful stewardship of the resources God provides.

Stewardship is an important aspect of strategic thinking, but if we don't hold strategy in tension with stewardship, we run the risk of developing systems of theological education driven by money rather than mission. In the article "Sustainability and Strategic Thinking in Theological Education" published in the Autumn 2019 edition of In Trust Magazine, Chris Meinzer, who has over 20 years of experience working with seminary data and currently serves as Senior Director of Administration for ATS, wrote, "I believe the largest driver in how schools utilize their human, financial, and physical resources is . . . history."

If our financial stewardship runs consistently with our history, it is important for us to acknowledge that our history has been formed in the siloed approach to education that has defined modern higher education. The result is that we have created a system in which we tend to justify charging fees that burden students with unsustainable debt and/or the church with unnecessary cost. While some schools have done great work in

trying to combat this challenge, primarily through the daunting work of raising money for financial aid, the fact is that much of that work still allows history to be the driving force behind decisions. The "cost" of theological education continues to rise at an alarming rate – and students are shouldering the burden.

It doesn't have to be this way.

CBTE invites us to look for new solutions rather than trying to secure funds for what we have always done. We must shift from thinking about "how can we fund quality education" to "how can finance be understood as part of the learning ecosystem which follows the rhythms of the learning journey in a way that allows all stakeholders to flourish." There is no rule that says high-quality theological education must be expensive. In fact, I might suggest that tuition and quality are inversely correlated. The wider the chasm between the church and the academy, the higher the sticker price of tuition will most likely be.

How Did We Get Here?

As modern higher education took its shape over the past few centuries, it was deeply formed in a context where content was assumed to be scarce – and in many ways it was. As a result, systems and structures were developed to make the production and sale of content more efficient – structures that tended to value silos over integration. The approach was helpful when access to the world's information was managed by a few particular people and places. Unfortunately, that approach also turned content delivery into a fixed (something schools already had plenty of). Over time, fixed-cost and content-driven classrooms became the driving force behind the learner's development. The tuition model to support this approach was built around credit hours which became the means by which these content-driven classrooms were quantified (even though that was not the original intention). Schools leveraged these courses to provide what they felt the church needed. The goal became mastery of a certain "body of knowledge." At the time, this approach made logical sense and seemed to be the most affordable and efficient way to develop educational models. Today, all that has changed.

Information is no longer housed in institutions but available widely. There is always more content than anyone (faculty, experts, etc.) or any institution (universities, libraries, journals, databases, etc.) can keep up with. There will always be more and more content which means more and more specialization. It also means that the economic value of content is constantly declining. If we understand our primary role to be content providers, we have both an educational and financial problem. Conversely, when we embrace the fact that knowing is integrative and that relationships are the most transformational means by which learners can be developed for their vocations, we can begin to see a new way forward.

What Next?

Competency-based theological education provides an opportunity to imagine systems of theological education that are genuinely affordable -- meaning they do not require chasing funds to manage fixed costs or

developing learning pathways that are only viable if bunches of students participate. CBTE upends the conventional financial paradigm with an affordable system that leverages 1) variable costs, 2) new tuition models, and 3) the vast resources available outside of the academy.

Variable Costs

Costs become variable instead of fixed because mentor relationships are the driving force behind the learners' development not the classroom. While learners may participate in wonderful and important classroom experiences, those experiences are not what the student is measured by, nor the primary mechanism that propels the student forward, meaning we can utilize such methods more judiciously. This one reality can dramatically lower an institution's fixed costs. Rather than building an educational pathway around "providing content," CBTE invites the learning, with the guidance and support of a mentor team, to acquire, integrate, and display learning -- to develop holistic knowledge. The expenses of a school, therefore, rise and fall in sync with learning rather than with the value and production of content.

Obviously, all of this requires a new vision for the role of faculty, staff, and administrators. In our experience, those who embrace a CBTE approach to learning and the operational practices to support it find freedom in their new role. Perhaps most exciting is that the variable nature of the revenue and costs allow people to decide where and how to invest their energies. While CBTE does require us to revisit topics that were once sacrosanct, we have found those conversations to be life giving.

New Tuition Models

With learning being the center of the educational journey rather than content delivery, it makes less sense to build tuition models around things like credit hours. Most schools doing CBTE have found that subscription pricing is a better option. By using a low-price recurring tuition model, students no longer need to worry about what they are going to pay for a particular semester and institutions do not need to build budgets around unknown revenue streams. This gives both parties cost certainty.

For the school, subscription payments mean that there is no need to worry about how something like "drop/add week" impacts a student's tuition. Financial aid processes do not need to include meticulous tracking of student enrollment.

For the student, subscription payments mean they have clarity and control over their tuition payments. They know exactly what it is going to cost because there are no additional fees, no change based on financial aid, and no adjustments due to course enrollment or progress. They also can control the pace of their progress and stop at any time.

Wider View of Resources

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of CBTE is the way it honors the vast resources outside of the academy. It invites us to lean into the fact that seminary doesn't hold all the knowledge necessary for developing students. When we embrace that reality, we learn that our partners are empowered to walk alongside us in more substantial ways. In many ways, they can provide learning experiences that would be impossible for us to replicate. Instead of asking, "What do we need to add to our content?" we can ask "Which partners are already doing good work?" That question opens our eyes to the fact that the educational journey is not about us. It is about the learner and the learner's context. With that new lens, we realize how much learning, content acquisition, and development of proficiency happens outside the walls of our schools and what the faculty at a school can provide. That reality spreads the power and privilege of the educational journey throughout the entire Body of Christ, which ultimately reduces the price of tuition and cost to educate students. Back to top.

PRACTICES OF CBTE: UNIFIED SYSTEMS

As we have been developing the Kairos Project over the better part of the past decade, a significant number of organizations, denominations, schools, and others across the landscape of theological education have asked us questions about the various principles of competency-based theological education or CBTE (e.g., customized proficiency, team-based mentoring, etc.). Very few have asked about the organizational practices. In my experience, that is because we tend to shy away from the most pressing issue within theological education – "dis-integration."

I contend that the vast majority of the challenges we see within theological education are symptoms of this deeper, more systemic and deep-seated issue. That is to say that the structures, systems, ways of being that have been shaped and formed by centuries of modern higher education tend to be segmented, siloed, and "departmentalized."

Now, as we continue our conversation about the organizational practices that support CBTE, we turn our attention to the practice of unified systems. As an organizational practice that requires us to let go of not only power but also our perceptions of clarity, unified systems invite schools to consider how our modern systems, structures, departments, and policies have a deformational (i.e., negative) impact on learning and discipleship.

Think about it. No matter how automated or integrated we try to make things, the reality is that the bedrock of conventional education was formed by a commitment to siloed disciplines, separate departments, shared (rather than collaborative) governance, and segmented operational practices. Arguments can be (and have been) made that suggest theological education's propensity to be prohibitively expensive, inaccessible, and often perceived as irrelevant stem from organizational structures and educational philosophies that encourage independence, competitive mindsets, and power struggles.

It is important to point out that over this same period of time there have been benefits of and changes to the way we have been doing things. Obviously, great work has been done by seminaries to address these challenges and many of those attempts should be studied because much can be learned. At the same time, however, our experience has shown that CBTE unlocks the potential for high levels of integration in ways conventional education will struggle to reproduce.

To start, we must recognize that each aspect of an educational system is dependent upon and impacted by every other aspect. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Therefore, decisions cannot be made without thinking about the entire system. CBTE more fully embraces this reality. To function well as an educational philosophy, CBTE invites us to remove departmental lines, distribute innovation, and integrate disciplines.

Remove Departmental Lines

Creating an organization that embraces the concept of integration is no simple task because it invites us to blur departmental lines that have shaped and formed our way of being as seminaries sense the mid-1800s. Departments, functional areas, and governance categories have defined how we go about our work – often more so than the discipleship task at hand. In short, our work is designed as it is, at least in part, because of the segmented structures of our organizations.

Here again, CBTE opens doors to new ways of thinking, or at least creates space for deep examination of our departmental way of being. A student engaged in a CBTE program will, by necessity, have fluid interaction with several different aspects of a seminary. She may work with faculty, mentors, administrators, alumni, financial supporters, board members, and other students on a single project or assignment. Staff members may find themselves in conversations about program design and faculty may end up in conversations about financial operations.

It is for this reason that we refrain from defining meeting attendance based on “title or “role.” Meetings, even board meetings, are open to anyone and all who come are invited to fully participate in the conversation. The key is moving away from meetings defined by role or title and toward meetings and conversations that take into account the entire enterprise.

Because CBTE fosters conversations, interactions, and educational modalities that intentionally stretch across disciplinary and departmental lines, it challenges long-held assumptions about the value of such departments and disciplines. It is not that the specific types of study associated with a particular discipline or tasks that are connected to certain departments are no longer valuable. It is that CBTE calls attention to the fact that their value is best stewarded when that study and those tasks are part of an integrated whole. Rather than working to create ever more definition to our disciplines or departments, we should be looking for ways to remove such boundaries.

Departmental lines tend to create power struggles, divisive policies, and systems of engagement that are not student-centered. Removing them simply means developing an organizational culture or way of being that sees the entire educational enterprise as one integrated system. We call this the Enterprise Model, and it is what connects the powerful educational philosophy of CBTE to the revolutionary paradigm shift that it can be.

In Kairos, students are part of a mutual learning environment; one in which the student, her mentors, and her vocational context are working, learning, and developing together. As a result, relationships, trust, hard conversations, and emotional investment become hallmarks of one's participation in a CBTE program. It should not be surprising to learn, therefore, that these relationships begin to cross conventional boundaries within institutional life.

The fact is CBTE requires us to recognize the importance of cohesive and integrated approaches to relationship development. The program itself becomes the mechanism by which we can build, cultivate, and steward relationships. If done correctly, we will see that fundraising, relationship development, marketing, operations, financial structures, program design, teaching, communication, etc. flow seamlessly throughout the CBTE paradigm. To do this effectively, we must be formed in a new way of being – one that sees us begin to think more broadly about our roles and our relationship to the comprehensive work of the school.

This doesn't mean development officers become professors and professors become enrollment managers. It does, however, mean that development officers may be better able to do their work if they serve on a few mentor teams and that faculty may be better mentors if they spend time engaged in conversations about how mentor teams impact enrollment management.

As we practice this blurring of departmental (even organizational) lines, we begin to create tangible expressions of the new power dynamics present within CBTE. If we remove departmental lines, we are, by definition, raising voices that have not traditionally been welcome at the table. Perhaps where this is most visible is in the task of innovation.

Distribute Innovation

Innovation in theological education has been an interesting thing to watch over the past number of years. While much time and energy has been put toward the development of new educational models, this work still suffers from the dis-integration I described earlier. As a result, the conversations or action related to innovation tends to be limited to a particular group or department within a school. Even in cases where schools have developed task forces related to innovation, which may include people from various departments within a school (e.g., faculty, admin, board, students, etc.), these teams still function under the auspices of a particular department or segment of the governance structure. In practice this means that even with an "integrated" team of people, the real choices or decisions around innovation often rest in the hands of "dis-integrated" structures. As a result, effective innovation or innovation that has the potential to bring lasting change rarely

occurs.

As schools embrace CBTE, more and more people within the organization begin to have access to more information. What was once hidden in a classroom or in unreadable (or inaccessible) assessment reports is now on display for mentors, staff, and ministry partners to experience in real time. Because of the fluid interaction with several aspects of the institution, people who were once not part of conversations about innovation may now have more information than those who once governed the innovation process.

The simple point is that CBTE, through the practice of unified systems, invites, perhaps requires, innovation to originate from anywhere within an organization. This is a good thing, but is perhaps the most recognizable shift in power – which means it is often easier said than done.

Because CBTE does not conform to semesters, credit hours, departments, or modalities and it distributes information within an organization, we should expect the power of innovation to be distributed across the organization, as well. It means fully embracing the fact that, for example, a staff member might be the one to develop an innovative approach to learning while a faculty member might create new opportunities related to finance. A board member might have an innovation connected to daily operations and an office manager may provide insight related to board governance.

Integrate Disciplines

The last aspect of unified systems comes through the fact that CBTE invites us to take advantage of the reality that learning is non-linear. It encourages proficiency of integration, not disciplines. To fully embrace the cross-disciplinary nature of theological education, the organization's processes and practices need to be unified and mutually reinforcing.

As students in Kairos progress through their journey of discipleship, they are empowered to leverage moments in time that naturally encourage integrated learning. As one would expect, when we engage in, respond to, and reflect on real life situations, we discover that life is not neatly divided into discrete disciplines. In the crucible of life, we find that proclaiming the Gospel is as much about biblical study as it is leadership and that leadership is as much about formation as it is strategy.

Unified systems support this type of learning because they help us remove boundaries that used to reinforce discipline-specific activities. In conventional approaches to education, we tended to have the "biblical studies department" be responsible for certain aspects of learning while the "theology department" paid attention to others. "Program directors" did the work of administering learning activities while the "business office" thought about how to manage access through pricing. The "dean's office" would then be responsible for trying to bring all of it together. As a result, things like developing programs, building budgets, hiring faculty, envisioning course schedules, and assessing student learning tended to happen with specific disciplines or departments in mind. In a CBTE approach, opportunities for guided learning need to be available when and how students

need/desire to access them. The “just-in-time” learning that occurs within CBTE pushes against our historic tendency to segment not only learning activities by discipline (e.g., through discrete courses) but also organizational activities like meetings, communication, strategic planning, and budgeting.

That type of segmentation unintentionally creates friction in a student’s educational journey because they bump into lines of demarcation that make it difficult to leverage those real-life, integrated moments in time that are key to learning, growth, and formation. In those moments, students and mentors need the freedom to access and engage with any collection of disciplines, learning activities, and personnel that will be most helpful in that moment. The practice of unified systems removes this friction and thereby supports CBTE in extraordinary ways. Back to top.

PRACTICES OF CBTE: FLEXIBLE TECHNOLOGY

When it comes to theological education, schools are notoriously slow to adopt new technology. When we do, it tends to be technology designed for institutions rather than humans. As such, the technology we use often reinforces the operational, educational, and financial practices that have come to define higher education. As with the organizational practices of affordable programs and unified programs, the practice of flexible technology invites us to move past institutional thinking and onto networked, collaborative thinking that fosters integration and customized learning.

That is our next topic of conversation– the organizational practice of flexible technology.

Here’s the problem. The technological systems that support most of higher education, no matter how integrated they claim to be, still assume each aspect of the institution is a wholly-separate function. As a result, the software tends to be designed not around humans but around the departments of a school.

For example, learning management systems (LMS) are often designed to integrate with student information systems (SIS) that assume students enroll in particular terms and pay a particular amount per credit hour. The “automation” that comes from such “integration” means that student information from an SIS is shared with an LMS so that when a student is enrolled in a course in the SIS she is also given access to that course in the LMS. To aid in this “automation” or “integration” of systems, companies have sought to develop software packages that offer everything – a learning management module, a student information system module, a financial services module, a fundraising module, etc. The goal in this approach is that schools will purchase an entire system from someone like Jenzabar or Blackbaud or Populi (and the list goes on).

It’s not that these systems are bad. In fact, some of them have cool features that do in fact aid in the

institutional management of students. The issue is they unintentionally reify educational structures that end up having undue power and influence on students' learning. Their goal is to streamline institutional workload and to do that they must make assumptions about what learning is, how it is structured, and how access to it is managed. In short, the driving force, therefore, is the institution not the student or learning.

CBTE invites us to become more aware of what it means to be student-centered and thereby more aware of how our systems, structures, and processes have a tendency to be focused on the institution. As a customizable journey of discipleship, CBTE requires technological systems that encourage customization and consistency, are built using a mobile-first stack of solutions, and are designed around the learner (human-centered) rather than courses or institutions. Let's take a brief look at a few of those aspects.

Encourage Customization and Consistency

In our conversations with people who are exploring CBTE for the first time, we have noticed that two common assumptions are made. People either assume that 1) it is just a new kind of distance learning wherein students sit in front of a screen to complete online courses or 2) students never use traditional learning experiences like seminars, courses, or intensives. While our experience is not exhaustive by any means, students in all of the CBTE programs of which we are aware participate in myriad learning experiences ranging from self-paced, asynchronous and project-based learning to seminars, intensives, and traditional semester-long courses. Some learning may take place on the campus of a school, portions online, and other bits at a church, nonprofit, or local business. CBTE encourages (we might say requires) participation in a wide range of learning experiences. As a result, the software used to support CBTE programs must be designed to handle everything from live online events to on-campus residencies to asynchronous endeavors – all while tracking progress toward customized proficiency and involving mentor teams. That means the technology needs to allow extensive customization and support consistency.

Many believe that this paradox of customization and consistency creates a technological challenge because the technology to encourage customization is often assumed to be much different than the technology required to support consistency. But it doesn't have to be that way. Software that puts the student (i.e., human) first, we will find it is possible to do both at the same time.

Embracing flexible technology may be difficult at first. We may find it is more cumbersome for us as administrators. That feeling often stems from the fact we have been formed to believe quality is best governed by segmenting learning into disciplines, generalizing understandings of proficiency, controlling the path a student takes, and departmentalizing organizational functions – all of which leads to technological solutions that are designed to simplify how control is enforced. As a paradigm shift in educational philosophy, CBTE requires a similar shift in technology.

One way to lean into the idea of flexible technology is to begin thinking about a mobile first stack of solutions.

Doing so will make us more responsive and open to ongoing and unending change.

Mobile First Stack of Solutions

In the past, schools hunted for single pieces of software that would handle "everything" we do as an institution. Often, these pieces of software assumed people would be using them while sitting at a desktop computer or a full-size laptop. These assumptions resulted in high costs (such systems which were exorbitantly expensive and often sold as capital investments), high commitment (such systems required multi-year commitments often trading reduced costs over time for locked-in contracts), and experiences that varied based on the type of device being used (which increases costs related to IT support).

The promise of these legacy systems was that everything in the institution would be integrated. In reality, however, the systems didn't fit with the day-to-day realities of serving learners well. As a result, staff created "shadow systems" to achieve basic tasks thereby eliminating the hoped-for integration. In fact, I was once a culprit of such work! I built an entire automated financial aid system using Excel rather than using the module embedded in the software the institution had purchased.

A better way forward is to embrace a “mobile-first” and “stack" approach to software. The “mobile first” part of that statement means working with software that is designed based on the assumption that it must first work on a mobile device (smaller screens) and then work on a laptop or desktop computer. Traditional approaches to software development for schools tend to assume that users sit at a table or desk and use a computer with a large screen. Today’s reality is that students, mentors, faculty, administrators are engaging in work and the learning process using mobile devices more than any other type of device. In short, if the software doesn’t work seamlessly on a mobile device (e.g., smartphone, tablet, etc.), then it doesn’t work.

The “stack” portion of the statement invites us to stop searching for and investing in one piece of software that attempts to do everything. Instead, we build a stack of software solutions in which each part of the ecosystem does one thing very well. In this approach, a school looks for simple and task-specific solutions that leverage modern data architecture with things like REST API's, Zapier triggers and actions, and ready-built integration with other tools. The root idea is that each piece of software can focus on a specific purpose which means the institution can switch out pieces of the stack as necessary rather than hitching the wagon, so to speak, to an expensive legacy system. A stack approach does mean staff and faculty need to have a different (and often growing) relationship with technology. Rather than seeking to master a particular technological system, we must master the ability to adapt to and leverage an array of technology that will change over time. Being student-centered means recognizing that technology is not stationary. This non-stationary reality fosters a human-centered approach.

Human-Centered

Lastly, we need software that is human-centered rather than institution-centered. By this statement, we are attempting to call attention to the fact that software designed for educational institutions tends to be developed around the assumption that the institution is at the center of the learning experience or at least that the institution is the most important part of the equation. As a result, the software tends to reinforce long-held assumptions about how education should work thereby placing dis-integration and institutional concerns at the center of the equation.

Given the fact that CBTE challenges this institution-centric approach to education, we should not be surprised that a paradigm shift in technology will invite us to think differently about everything from learning experience design and engagement to learner assessment and onboarding. We contend that human-centered software, which places the learner's needs above institutional needs, will require institutions to make wholesale changes to everything from their financial models to registration processes and credit hours to learning artifact collection – and this is a good, even necessary, thing!

Human-centered technology that supports CBTE is built around how people learn in real life rather than simply digitizing content and "delivering" it to learners. CBTE is not about delivering something. It is about walking with someone. It will allow mentors, students, faculty, and administrators to develop learning pathways that meet people where they are and help them get to where they need to be in light of their call, context, and community. Software that is human-centered empowers mentors and faculty to adjust developmental pathways in real time as opportunities for integrated learning present themselves rather than being trapped inside static pathways.

How all of this works will vary based on practice and context. The key, however, is that we put humans at the center of the design process rather than searching for software that enables us to "automate" or "integrate" conventional approaches to education. As an organizational practice, flexible technology requires us to recognize that education is about humans interacting with other humans in real time and at the same level. Back to top.

PRACTICES OF CBTE: COLLECTIVE GOVERNANCE

As children we are taught to share. We share toys, time with loved ones, and take turns on things like swings and playground equipment. Learning to share is often a very difficult process because we struggle to fully understand the concept. Take, for example, an experience I had with my two little girls when they were four and two. The four-year-old girl received a pen for Christmas. It was a fun little pen that could change colors if you pressed the right buttons, and the mechanical features of it added a little intrigue beyond the normal pens she used when doodling at home.

A few months later, she was drawing with the pen and my two-year-old daughter asked her if she could use it. In prototypical fashion, the four-year-old responded quickly with "No! It's mine!" I responded in the moment like most parents would, I asked the four-year-old to share her pen. The four-year-old did and the two-year-old began to color delightfully on the paper in front of her. All was good with the world – until the next day.

The following day, the four-year-old was again drawing with her pen and the two-year-old came to ask if she could use it. Having "learned" to share the pen the day before, the four-year-old politely said "Sure! You can use it." I was pleased with the interaction and the four-year-old was so happy to know she had shared. This time, however, the two-year-old chose to use the pen as a percussion instrument! Rather than coloring nicely on the paper in front of her, my two-year-old daughter began pounding out a groovy beat on the table!

Obviously, this mortified my four-year-old who abruptly reached over, forcibly removed the pen from her two-year-old sister's hand, and shouted "No! You can't do that with it. It's mine!" It seemed the four-year-old was perfectly fine with sharing so long as the two-year-old did exactly what the four-year-old thought she should be doing.

I might suggest this is how shared governance works in most seminaries. This concept of governance is ingrained in the structures and accreditation standards that shape institutions. Unfortunately, the way we have approached it has fostered power struggles, infighting, turf wars, institutional silos, and disconnection from those we claim to serve. It seems that in most instances shared governance is structured around the idea that the work of the institution is divided amongst the board, faculty, and administration. This is how we "share" the institution's governance: I control this, you control that. The problem, however, is that by structuring it in this way we create a situation wherein true collaboration is nearly impossible. Each year, the lines between the three areas get more clearly defined and the space between the groups grows over time.

While we talk about how the work of the institution (e.g., assessment, strategic planning, program development, etc.) must include voices from each group, the reality is that schools often fight over who has "ultimate" power or control of some particular aspect or another. This kind of collaboration devolves into

something like the conversation between my girls. The administration may allow some input into strategic planning from the faculty until the faculty decides to do it in a way the administration believes it wasn't intended – at which point the administration says, "No! You can't do that with it! It's mine." The faculty may share program development with the board and administration until they see it isn't being done "correctly" – at which point they also say, "No! You can't do that with it. It's mine!"

Perhaps the worst part of all of this is the fact that the common approach to shared governance disempowers voices outside of the institution. By fighting with each other over power, control, or strategy, we lose the opportunity to fully engage those we claim to serve. These never-ending power struggles take our attention away from real collaboration which, in turn, brings a misalignment between our practices and values. The misalignment multiplies institutional costs, disconnects our education from the communities we are trying to serve and, all too often, creates toxic contexts that make it impossible to provide education that is affordable, accessible, relevant and faithful. Competency-based theological education (CBTE) offers, perhaps requires, a fresh expression of governance. It invites schools to think of governance as something to steward collaboratively and not something to divide and conquer (i.e., share). Put simply, the way we operate in community is in sync with the way we learn and steward those God places in our care. We do not espouse or teach one thing and then practice another. As a collective body of Christ-followers who have been entrusted with resources and a mission, we should engage in a trust-based collaborative approach to governance. In this approach, power and prestige are released by every person and group within an institution in order to get the best insights around the table. Systems and structures need to be as flat as possible, allowing diverse voices to speak with power into the work of an institution in order to see how best to reduce costs, increase accessibility, maintain relevance, and remain faithful.

In doing so, we will not only give away internal power but also welcome the Body of Christ as our primary collaborator. When we begin to trust each other and see governance as a collaborative process, we are more able to let go of not only individual power but also institutional power. For example, we move from inviting voices outside the "walls" of the institution to consult with us or give input and toward giving them the power to make decisions on what can and should be done. This release of power opens doors to conversations that are currently closed (allowing us to see what we could not see otherwise) and empowers the church to be fully invested in the development of disciples – which is a key aspect of competency-based theological education.

In this way, collaborative governance can be very disruptive in that it upends a more traditional model of governance. The elevation of different concerns and other voices can be perceived as a diminishing of the concerns and voices of those given power in the traditional model. This can be unsettling at the beginning of the change process. It is also disruptive because once the trust-based collaborative culture and governance structure has been created, the traditional processes for including voices become antiquated and harmful. New processes for including voices must be developed, and these new processes will, in turn, liberate the institution from the bondage of silo-thinking.

Competency-based theological education requires us to intentionally draw on the wealth of wisdom that exists outside of the academy and to embrace perspectives from new voices within the institution. In doing so, we

create a space where best practices for business operations and strategy can be developed by people other than CEOs, CFOs, and board members and new approaches to education can be developed by people who are not faculty members. Over time, as voices that were once on the margin are empowered to fully and collaboratively engage in all aspects of governance, the principle of collaborative mission is reinforced and strengthened. In short, collaborative governance is only possible when a shared mission and shared values are aligned with shared and empowering practices.

It is in the work of alignment that the greatest challenge actually resides. Many of us have not done the hard work of aligning our espoused values and mission with our daily practices as an organization. We struggle with collaboration because the various segments of shared governance within the institution are often not trying to accomplish the same things. While we speak the same mission, our practices end up fragmenting the organization's understanding of that mission. By practicing collaborative governance, we are more able to align our mission with those we serve because the release of power sheds light on where our organizational practices do not align with our espoused values and mission.

For Sioux Falls Seminary, this distribution of power opened our eyes to the fact that while we claimed to be "student-centered," the reality was that our "institution-centric" practices were putting or keeping students in poverty through the burden of student debt. By giving away power once reserved for particular voices within our institution, we were able to better align practices and values. As a result, less than 1% of our students borrow funds to attend seminary – and even then, they accumulate less debt, on average, than any of their peers at similar schools.

When that happens – when we see that our shared governance practices are pushing against the very thing we say is our mission – we must respond with humility and grace rather than power and prestige. Competency-based theological education fosters this type of conversation in a way that traditional models of education have struggled to produce. The result is a collaborative governance culture that is responsive, rooted in trust, and embraces the movement of the Spirit as it works in the lives of those who call Jesus Lord. Back to top.

PRACTICES OF CBTE: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

When a community of people (i.e., a school) is following the principles and practices we have been describing, the opportunity to evaluate and improve the school's various programs and processes is much greater than it was in the conventional approaches that have come to be the norm.

For example, in Kairos there are thousands of participants (i.e., students or mentors) and dozens of partners – all working together in light of the principles of CBTE. As a result, there is a greater amount of data from which we can glean insights on what is working and what isn't and greater visibility into the processes and systems creating the data. With the blessing of new data, we are presented with an opportunity to think differently about how we improve learning, programs, and the institution. Rather than simply cataloging data in assessment reports that are reviewed every few years with the goal of doing macro-level program reviews, institutions engaged in CBTE are able to engage in ongoing change thereby creating a culture of continuous improvement.

The concept of continuous improvement is not new. In our experience, the best way to learn about it is to study the product development process utilized by several contemporary software companies. We find CBTE allows institutions to combine new opportunities for observation and evaluation with the approach to software development trumpeted by people like Jason Fried, founder and CEO of Basecamp and a leading voice in contemporary software development practices. With this approach we can improve programs and student learning at both the micro (individual student) and macro (entire programs and institutions) levels – often closing feedback loops in real time as we respond to the data created when we follow the principles and practices of CBTE.

In practice, this means CBTE creates space for at least three continuous improvement accelerants: 1) data-driven micro and macro improvements, 2) empowered feedback loops, and 3) distributed ideation.

Data-Driven Macro & Micro Improvements

In a conventional system, a school of 150 students might get input from a few points of connection: the students, the faculty who teach courses in the program's curriculum, a few engaged board members, and the staff who are connected to the assessment process. There may also be mechanisms for gathering a smattering of data from "external" constituencies. This is a good description of where Sioux Falls Seminary was in 2013.

We launched the Kairos Project in October of 2014, which was guided by the principles and practices of CBTE. After a few years, about 50% of the students in the school were part of the Kairos Project and our connection points expanded exponentially. With 75 students, the school had well over 200 engaged mentors, 60 to 75 different ministry contexts, new/additional faculty who are serving as mentors, mission-minded partners who helped to create the program, more staff members who interacted with students along the way, new stakeholders who were more engaged in the Project, and a fresh array of learning experiences that were as unique as the 75 students.

Each student represented a network of connections to our system of assessment. We knew more about student progress and learning, program effectiveness, institutional vitality, mission fulfillment, and stakeholder engagement than we thought was possible. Because it is possible to be overwhelmed by the data created or

made visible by a CBTE program, we had to find a way to capture, synthesize, and respond to it. This is why CBTE requires the practice of continuous improvement.

A commitment to continuous improvement lessens the burden of this exponential increase in assessment data because it empowers institutions to make data-driven decisions at both the micro (individual student) and macro (program and institutional) levels. Rather than collecting mounds of data for future use, we respond to these streams of data in real time. For example, incremental changes can be made to seminar schedules, curriculum documents, resources within an LMS, even the educational path of particular students. These micro changes are driven by data and made without the need for wide-ranging conversations. Over the course of a few months or a semester, data can be aggregated to suggest macro-level changes (e.g. adjustments to the user interface of an LMS, new language within a competency or outcome statement, refreshed orientation material for new students, curricular enhancements, etc.). With the increased presence of timely and actionable data, a school engaged in CBTE can make ongoing change that consistently improves the program. These changes are what close the feedback loop.

Empowered Feedback Loops

Well-designed and well-meaning assessment systems can come to a grinding halt when confronted with the conventional decision-making processes of higher education. The assessment data may reveal the need to adjust the curriculum and this begins a six-month conversation on what to change. After we decide what to change, we develop a plan to implement the new curriculum only to find that another change is needed (because the previous data is now over a year old). Another example could be the one a friend of mine shared with me regarding the process for appointing faculty in the teaching hospital where she worked. It served as a stark reminder of the reality that well-meaning processes can push against the need for real-time action. During the early parts of the pandemic in March 2020, a teaching hospital was overwhelmed with the need for doctors. While several doctors were available, willing, able, and qualified to serve, they could not do so because each of them had to be approved as faculty in addition to being approved as doctors – a process that normally took 4 to 6 months. It is quite easy for the process of decision-making and implementation to derail any momentum that might be created by assessment data or on-the-ground feedback.

We believe CBTE creates an opportunity to approach this challenge from a fresh perspective. With its focus on ends rather than means, CBTE invites institutions to hold lightly many things which were once sacrosanct. It is not that we completely abandon those things we once held dear. Rather we give them appropriate weight within a system that says outcomes, demonstrated by observable behavior and/or data, are the guide. By adjusting this weight distribution, we are able to develop faculty, staff, mentors, partners, board members, and administrators who embrace and embody this new reality thereby empowering people to make decisions without the need for complex and cumbersome systems of oversight.

Let's take curriculum adjustments as an example. In a conventional system, conversations about curricular adjustments will no doubt be based on good assessment data and will take into account the program goals and outcomes. Eventually, however, the conversation will turn to a focus on means. We will talk about which

courses, assignments, and activities students must complete in order to address the issue noted in the data. After several conversations about the means, we will develop a plan for implementing the idea and a way to assess the change. Again, this is all well-meaning and focused on enhancing quality. The challenge with this approach, however, is that it assumes: 1) the means will deliver the intended outcome, 2) that each student will respond to the means in the same way, and 3) that a small group of people who are not connected to the day-to-day life of each student are the right group to make this decision.

In a CBTE system, the mentor team, who is tasked with holistic and general assessment of integrated outcomes, is trained to conduct assessment in a particular way in light of program goals, rubrics, discrete competencies, and institutional mission. As a result, when they notice a student is not adequately demonstrating competency, they have the power, wisdom, and competence needed to make changes in real time. They can adjust the learning pathway to account for the areas in which the student needs more development. The team gathered data through a consistent process of assessment, reflected on the data in light of their "close-to-the-ground" knowledge of the student and her context, worked with the student to make adjustments in real time, and closed the feedback loop by revisiting the same assessment process that surfaced the need for change. In a conventional system we gather feedback and slowly close the loop. In CBTE, we gather feedback and close it in real-time – all the while gathering data that can be aggregated to inform large-scale institutional/programmatic assessment.

Now, imagine how that plays across all of the Kairos community. With students, mentors, and partners spread out around the world, data is being constantly generated thereby creating feedback loops that are opened and closed on a daily basis. It also creates a distributed ideation network.

Distributed Ideation

With a distributed community of people who have on-the-ground access to real-time qualitative and quantitative data about what is working, where things need to be enhanced, and how students are progressing, one should expect ideas for how to improve the program or various aspects of the organization to come from anywhere – and this must be encouraged! Each of those additional connections points represents a different perspective, a different source of feedback, and another engaged voice. Improvements that come from a program director, vice president, board member, office manager, student, and partner are all valid. The source of the idea does not determine its value. If we confine ourselves to the expectations of those with the most power, we will undermine the new data provided by CBTE.

The challenge is to create mechanisms for gathering that feedback, synthesizing it into actionable ideas, and responding to it. Many of the improvements we have made to Kairos have come from this extended network of connections. They do not always come from our full-time faculty and staff. In one case, it was a software engineer from a partner organization that suggested the layout for a learning experience library. In another instance, it was a denominational connection that suggested a different approach to clinical pastoral education. The key is to recognize that this vast array of connections creates not only a dispersed network of learning but also a distributed system of ideation.

Over the years, as any school moves more fully into the principles and practices of CBTE, they will find that it becomes easier, even natural, to focus on continuous improvement. Given our experience with Kairos, it is hard to imagine any other way. While we did not set out to develop a system of continuous improvement, we learned very quickly that we need to expect – even embrace – ongoing, unending, and adaptive change. Back to top.

PRACTICES OF CBTE: QUALITY FRAMEWORK

Most modern approaches to education tend to assume that quality is controlled through content and discipline-specific rubrics utilized in task-specific and analytic assessments conducted by experts in those particular disciplines. That assumption is often played out in curricular development practices which tend to focus on creating rigid pathways built using standardized content (i.e., syllabi) which is provided through predetermined educational experiences (i.e., courses) facilitated (i.e., taught) by particular types of people (i.e., credentialed content experts). I refer to this as the "Pyramid of Courses." For many years, the academy (and the church) has tended to assume that if we take a group of students through a predefined course of study, they will achieve particular outcomes. The thinking seems to have been, "If we focus on the inputs, we will get the desired outcome."

CBTE invites us to challenge that assumption by rethinking how we understand and "control" quality. Because one's understanding of quality flows from that person's engagement in a community of practice, the fact is that standards of excellence (i.e., quality, proficiency, competency, etc.) cannot be universally defined. The principles and practices that give form and shape to the educational philosophy of CBTE, require schools to embrace the fact that all things must be assessed with greater awareness of what "proficiency" looks like within a given context. To do this well, a CBTE program must have mechanisms in place that help mentor teams, students, partners, and faculty walk through the process of particularizing definitions of proficiency in light of a student's context.

This opportunity provided by CBTE also creates one of its unique challenges. Through CBTE entire educational programs can be tailored to an individual student's journey of discipleship. Rather than building a Pyramid of Courses CBTE allows each student to have a customized educational journey. To put that more simply – two students could graduate from the same institution with the same degree and yet engage in different content, complete different assignments, and progress at different speeds. Therein lies the challenge. With that level of customization, how do we ensure quality? If quality is no longer determined by consistency of content or assignments, how then is it determined?

Our answer is that while quality must be contextually defined, it can be broadly assured through a commitment to shared language, practices, and commitments. We call this a quality framework – a framework that empowers students to envision a compelling path toward proficiency, and mentors to recognize when contextualized proficiency has been achieved.

In general, the quality framework is a series of cascading interests that mutually reinforce each other. Those interests fall into three broad categories:

• First, there is a shared understanding of how standards of excellence work.

• Then, there are certain principles and practices that should be present in order for a school to effectively implement and maintain a CBTE program.

• Next, there are shared design principles that must be true for all programs.

• Finally, there are a few aspects that are particularized within each program and/or student journey.

In Kairos, well-developed programs begin with clearly defined and commonly held values and principles. These form the foundation of a high-quality program. They articulate the educational philosophy, give direction to future customization, and determine the way in which the school creates and understands the aspects of particular programs (i.e., performance indicators, inputs, rubrics, and assessment).

When thinking about our quality framework, the key points to remember are that 1) it is rooted in the fact that standards of excellence are contextually defined, 2) a shared set of principles and practices inform and give shape to everything we do, 3) quality is governed through shared processes not shared content, and 4) the power of program development, assessment, and engagement is distributed throughout the learning community rather than held within a small number of internal voices. By approaching quality in this way, we not only create a more inviting and engaging learning experience, but also help students and mentors learn how to define and develop proficiency. As a result, we can ensure that students will reach the level of proficiency that will help them flourish in their current and future vocational contexts for the sake of the world. Back to top.

THE KAIROS QUALITY FRAMEWORK

As we engage in our call to steward followers of Jesus who flourish in their vocations for the sake of the world, we do so with the recognition that high-quality educational journeys must be developed with care. To help us achieve this goal, we embrace the following quality framework. As a series of cascading interests that mutually reinforce each other, the quality framework has four key points to remember:

1) it is rooted in the fact that standards of excellence are contextually defined,
2) a shared set of principles and practices inform and give shape to everything we do,
3) quality is governed through shared processes not shared content, and
4) the power of program development, assessment, and engagement is distributed throughout the learning community rather than held within a small number of internal voices.

By approaching quality in this way, we not only create a more inviting and engaging learning experience, but also help students and mentors learn how to define and develop proficiency. As a result, we can ensure that students will reach the level of proficiency that will help them flourish in their current and future vocational contexts for the sake of the world. Read on to see the outline of the Kairos Quality Framework.

The Kairos Quality Framework

Institutional and Programmatic Characteristics That Are Shared Across All Programs in Kairos:

Standards of Excellence are Contextually Defined

Our approach to education is built on the fact that standards of excellence are always contextually understood. As an important starting point, this reality requires us to recognize that one community's definition of quality cannot be superimposed or forced on everyone. Within our quality framework, this requires us to develop systems and processes that keep students, mentors, and programs "close to the ground." In our experience, institutions often under-estimate the time it takes to develop a list of values & principles that are clearly articulated, understood, and embraced across the entire institution. They are, however, the bedrock for the quality framework.

Shared Principles

A commitment to contextually defined standards of excellence is integrated into the construction, administration, and practice of the educational enterprise, by ensuring that everything we do flows from a set of reinforcing principles. Those principles are:

• 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 (i.e., churches, denominations, businesses, educators, administrators, parachurch organizations, etc.) are working together on it.

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

• Contextualized Discipleship - Followers of Jesus are always developed within a particular context and that context should inform and shape the journey.

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

• 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).

• Holistic Assessment - If we are using integrated outcomes then we must assess everything in a holistic fashion, meaning we need to consider proficiency of learning, character, and craft as a collective whole.

Shared Practices

Principles provide helpful scaffolding for developing people and programs, but that scaffolding must have a strong foothold in order to be stable. Stability comes through a set of organizational practices that undergird and integrate day-to-day functions of the organization and the educational journeys it claims to offer.

Those are:

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

• Unified Systems: Everything from the way a school thinks about transcripts to the way it sends emails is inextricably linked. We need to build systems that embrace this reality.

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

• Collective Governance: The siloes of the traditional approach to governance does not support CBTE well. Instead, we need to build trust and empower voices that were previously not welcome at the "governance table" in seminaries.

• Continuous Improvement: 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: This is what we are talking about in this article! 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.

Shared Assessment Process/Rubric (Generalized & Holistic Rubrics)

The mechanism/process we use for assessment (i.e., institutional, program, and student learning assessment) and the philosophy that undergirds that process is shared by all programs, faculty, students, mentors, and partners. Flowing from the commitments outlined in the principle of holistic assessment and the practice of continuous improvement, each program must use the same general and holistic rubric. This means that the rubrics we create cannot be task-specific (meaning they require each student to complete the exact same assignment) nor can they be analytic (meaning they are focused on one particular result). In doing so, the rubrics empower mentor teams to review and assess student learning across several artifacts, conversations, and performances (i.e., it is generalized) while integrating learning across disciplines and learning categories (i.e., it is holistic). Such rubrics embrace contextualized proficiency by inviting the mentor team to particularize general and holistic rubrics in conversation with the student and the student's current or anticipated vocational context.

Finally, by leveraging a shared assessment process and rubric, the institution can invest in the training and

support necessary to develop fully engaged mentors who embrace and live out the educational philosophy. A shared assessment process creates clarity while also being effective in a broad array of programs.

Shared Development Path

A shared development path is what helps mentor teams, students, partners, and faculty walk through the process of particularizing definitions of proficiency in light of a student's context and vocation. As Kairos programs are developed, partners, contexts, licensure boards, and others outside the walls of a school must have a strong voice in: 1) defining proficiency, 2) describing the nuances of how proficiency is demonstrated, and 3) the particular way a student's journey might be adapted to better fit a given context.

Characteristics That Are Particularized Within Each Program:

Particularized (but still shared) Goals and Learning Outcomes
Each program has unique goals and learning outcomes. That is to say that the purpose of the program or what the program is trying to provide or make possible is unique to that degree. For example, a master of arts in counseling is not trying to do the same thing as a master of divinity. However, while the programs have unique goals, they all share a common set of commitments. In practice, this means programs cannot be built with goals that oppose each other in some sort of philosophical manner or with outcomes that are not aligned with the mission of the organization. For example, if the institution is focused on developing disciples, all programs need to embrace that shared goal. In addition, each program will have exactly one set of goals – not different goals for different "tracks" or "specializations" or "emphases" within a degree. For example, a Doctor of Ministry will have one set of goals, not a set of goals for a DMin in Spiritual Direction or a DMin in Leadership. The specification comes by living out the practices and principles listed above (which allows for contextualized particularization). As a result, much attention must be paid to how the goals and learning outcomes are articulated so that they are broad enough to encompass several different contexts yet focused enough to provide direction.

Particularized Competencies

A competency is a discrete learning goal that has relevance within a given context. Note that we define it as something that has relevance within a context. That means "leadership" is not a competency because it is too broad a term. It must be contextually defined and that definition must emerge from a conversation between practitioners in that context, the academy, and organizations who might be interested in working with particular students. If we impose an institutional competency of "leadership" all we are doing is replacing what was once a course entitled "Christian Leadership" with a competency called "Christian Leadership." Competencies are measurable, understood within a particular context, and can be nuanced by mentor teams who are actually on the ground with the students. They are developed in conversation with a mentor team using the shared development path.

Particularized Indicators

Within a CBTE program, indicators are observable behaviors that demonstrate a student's achievement of a particular goal or learning outcome. You could also describe them as the outputs or circumstances that signal

achievement. Indicators are what students are held accountable to and what determine or signify progress within a program. They are what give form and shape to the shared rubrics used by mentors within a given program. Indicators are also where contextualized proficiency intersects with programmatic outcomes. As stated above, “All things must be assessed with full awareness of what ‘proficiency’ looks like within a given context.” This means that while a school may have particular outcomes for a given degree, the indicators that signal proficiency of an outcome may vary from context to context

Suggested Inputs and Interactions

Inputs serve as the suggested means by which students may encounter, acquire, investigate, and integrate content, experiences, and ways of being. In conventional programs, inputs are often the courses students take and the particular readings, experiences, or activities that reside in those courses. In Kairos, inputs are “suggested” because they are simply the inputs the school believes could be helpful for students as they develop proficiency within a given outcome. Because the mentor team is working with the student to demonstrate contextualized proficiency, it is possible (even probable) for the team to allow and encourage students to engage with resources other than those listed in a program.

This is also true for the means by which students interact and reflect on content or other inputs. In conventional educational models both the content and the way in which students should interact with the content (i.e., the assignments) are prescribed. In CBTE, students and mentor teams have the freedom to adapt not only content, but also how students reflect on the content and the way in which they engage with it.

By adhering to this framework, Kairos is positioned to meet people where they are and then to walk with them as they discern and discover what God has in store for them as they participate in God’s mission! Back to top.