

Meet [Competency-Based Theological Education](#)

This article has hyperlinks for those who want to learn more.

Competency Based Education—what is that? The American Association of Colleges of Nursing gives us a start:

“Competency-based education is a system of instruction, assessment, feedback, self-reflection, and academic reporting that is based on students’ **demonstrating** that they have learned the knowledge, attitudes, motivations, self perception, and skills expected of them as they progress through their education.”

Picture it this way. My wife taught piano for over twenty years. She used a skill-based, progressive curriculum. With the end in mind, Deb taught. Piano students learned step-by-step. They made progress on their individual timetables.

Could such an approach work in ministry training? Someone might say, “We already do that. We teach skills. We teach others how to exegete biblical texts, counsel, preach, and teach.”

We may do so in *groups*, of course. We do so in classrooms face-to-face. I think especially of my own African context. Here technology issues can make electronic distance learning challenging. We like to see each other face-to-face. Traditional learning models prevail.

That is, this article is not about what your brothers in Africa are doing yet, but what some of us are working on. One reason: Partners who want training often work in agriculture too.

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, USA, [has been implementing CBE](#) for several years.

In Africa many of us like football. You may call it soccer. For years in Florida I coached soccer/football teams that my children were on. Like my wife’s piano lessons, we began with the end in mind. We wanted to grow in skills—and win. We worked together on both. We worked [backwards](#), you might say. (What does it take to win? Well, ...)

I used to tell myself, when it came to coaching, “No laps, no lines, no lectures.”

No laps: Don't have players run around the field without the ball even if they need to get more fit. Every player needs to get better at dribbling the ball.

No lines: Let's say we're practicing passing, receiving passes, or shooting. Having one or two players active and the others just watching is inefficient. We figured out ways to involve everyone.

No lectures: I explained many aspects of the game to the players. But I tried not to. Soccer practices aren't lectures. They are activities. Players learned by *doing* much better than they learned by hearing. They learned from the games—both what went well and what did not.

I did not know that in a way I was experimenting with aspects of Competency Based Education.

Someone may say, "Okay, the analogies help, but bottom line, **what is CBE?**"

Martin Luther College defines it as "an outcomes-based approach to earning a college degree or other credential that asks learners to demonstrate their proficiency in identified knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors." For more, see "[What is CBE at MLC?](#)"

Or check out AACN's 6:57 [YouTube video](#), "What is Competency-Based Education?" "In this video, Dr. Jacquelyn McMillan-Boeher of the Duke University School of Nursing shares six elements that distinguish competency-based education (CBE) from traditional educational models."

McMillan-Boeher directs the Institute of Educational Excellence at Duke University School of Nursing. She says CBE differs from traditional academic processes in:

1. *Culture:* CBE's approach is more individualized and less classroom based.
2. *Instruction:* Teachers are not the sole deliverer. Practice partners are key.
3. *Progression:* CBE focuses more on what the student can do.
4. *Assessment:* Multiple formative assessments help move students toward success. Students might retake a summative assessment, but only in part—the part in which they had trouble.
5. *Grading:* The approach is less norm-based than traditional models. It may be pass-fail. Coaching helps students get ready to move to the next stage of learning.
6. *Pace:* This is the most controversial aspect. Even in a semester-based system,

CBE helps students move at their own pace.

Back to youth football. In the States, assessment could be, well, interesting. Some parents screamed during games about how their children were progressing. Coaches were not the only ones grading progress or the pace of progress.

Competency Based Theological Education (CBTE) has similarities. Take Kairos University of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, USA, for example. Board members don't expect the final say. Professors do not take charge of students in the same way most seminaries operate. Kairos has four people work together:

"Each participant in Kairos is part of a mentor team, and each team is composed of a student, faculty mentor, vocational mentor, and personal mentor. Kairos invites each member of the team to see himself or herself as a sojourner, co-learner, and disciple of Jesus. [...] Together, the team discerns what it means to develop and display proficiency of content, character, and craft in light of what it means to be a follower of Jesus" (source: "Principles of CBTE," a password-protected 14-page document Kairos supplied to ICETE for a nano-course on competency-based theological education).

Questions

1. "That sounds involved. The way we have been doing it seems simpler. Why did Competency Based Theological Education start gaining traction?"

One reason may not apply to schools in our worldwide fellowship. In some schools of theology, education got separated from the local church. Education diverged more and more from mission.

2. "We are not seeing that wholesale, but we would still like to learn more. Is there a book you can recommend?"

Start with Kenton C. Anderson and Gregory J. Henson's book [*Theological Education: Principles and Practices of a Competency-Based Approach*](#). Kregel Publications, 2024. 144 pages.

3. "I don't want to read a book. Can I take a short course instead?"

You could take ICETE's 2-hour, self-paced course, [*Competency Based Theological Education*](#).

4. “Anything else?”

Pray for wisdom and love. Work and pray. *Ora et labora*. We are practicing the music of the eternal kingdom. With it, unlike your favorite football team’s next match, glorious outcomes await. Jesus has already won.

He says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

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