

ATS Guidelines on Competency-Based Theological Education undergo revision

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

As more ATS schools explore and implement Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) in an increasing variety of contexts, the ATS Board of Commissioners recognized that it was time to review and revise the Guidelines on Competency-Based Theological Education, first approved by the Board in 2020 and modestly updated in 2023.



In addition to the expansion of the numbers and types of schools exploring and implementing CBTE, the revised 2024 Guidelines recognize changes that the United States Department of Education has made in some of its rules regarding authorization of accrediting agencies to approve direct assessment programs. While few ATS schools use direct assessment for CBTE, the ATS Commission on Accrediting needed to make some adjustments in its approach. The Board is certainly sensitive to requiring additional work from member schools, but it believes that greater clarity about CBTE through revised procedures and the *Guidelines* can, in the long run, better serve students and save schools time and resources.

ATS will host a webinar on Friday, November 8, from 2 to 3 p.m. (ET) to explain and field questions (those submitted prior to the webinar, and, as time allows, those submitted during the webinar), related to the revised *Guidelines* and CBTE programs in ATS schools in general. Member schools can [register now](#) for the webinar and submit questions.

Changes to the Guidelines

The most significant change in the process of implementing programs that use CBTE is that while previous guidelines stated that the Board of Commissioners required submission of a petition *only* for programs using direct assessment—those not based on courses and credits—the Board now also requires submission of a petition for programs that are based on courses and credits. The petitions must be approved by the Board before programs are implemented.

The Board has noted recently that some CBTE programs have been launched, with notification submitted to ATS staff but without the programs being sufficiently planned and developed, which led to some confusion for students and faculty. The Board believes that the petition process, tied closely to the revised *Guidelines* will better serve schools and their students by ensuring more complete institutional and educational planning before programs are launched.

Overall, the changes highlight and clarify the role of faculty, identify hybrid programs that combine elements of “traditional” and competency-based approaches, update the historical sketch of CBTE within ATS, and identify specific standards that should be addressed by each of the “ten factors” to which schools need to attend. Each guideline addresses a specific standard (or standards) and clarifies expectations of the *Standards of Accreditation*.

The Board of Commissioners and the ATS staff believe these revisions will assist schools in their planning and highlight the requirement that all programs, regardless of modality, will fulfill the expectations of the *Standards* (see Standards 3.6-3.9):

- Guidelines 1, 3, 7, and 9 are unchanged from the prior version apart from identifying the particular standards they address.
- The Board added language to Guideline 6 that highlights the expectation of Standard 3.9 for a “viable student community of learning” in addition to regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students.

The remaining five guidelines include relatively modest but more extensive revisions:

- Guideline 2 requests more extensive information about competencies and how they are defined. The guideline also specifies the need for “behavioral-based performance indicators” that must be met ultimately to earn the credential. It also asks for greater detail than required by the previous guidelines about the array of learning activities “designed, reviewed, and approved by faculty” that students might engage. These changes uplift expectations in Standard 3: Student Learning and Formation, and the degree program standards, 4: Master’s Degrees and 5: Doctoral Degrees.

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- The revised Guideline 4 reiterates the need for a plan for assessing each program’s identified competencies. In accord with Standards 2.5 and 2.6, and the various degree program standards, each competency must clearly align with expected program outcomes and identify expected levels of achievement that lead to awarding of degrees.

- Guideline 5 is intended to clarify the expectation

in Standard 8 of the ongoing faculty role in design, delivery, oversight, and evaluation of competencies, as well as clarity about others’ roles in that evaluation.

- Revised language in Guideline 8 more exactly matches the wording used in Standard 3. Because of the extensive use of mentors in CBTE programs, the guideline also requests greater detail about the use of mentors, how their role differs from that of the faculty, their training, ongoing development, and evaluation.
- The Board revised Guideline 10 to address the common question of workload and update the language from “traditional forms” to “current generally accepted standards.” The revised guideline gives the example of “normal expectations and calculations used for credit hours” to attend to the requirement of Standard 3.2 that schools demonstrate “academic rigor in student learning and formation.”

Please [join us on November 8 for the webinar](#) and submit any questions you would like to have addressed.



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