

**On-the-Job Seminary:
Three Experiments in Doing Theological Education in the Workplace
Dr. Nathan Hitchcock, Sevensided Consulting
dr.nathanhitchcock@gmail.com
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Abstract: In recent years three graduate theological schools - Northwest Baptist Seminary (British Columbia), Sioux Falls Seminary (South Dakota) and Grace Theological Seminary (Indiana) - have taken the bold step to translate seminary fully into the workplace setting. Under the name CBTE (competency-based theological education), they have couched their training within the actual life of local churches, parachurch organizations and businesses, that is, into the ministry setting where students are already working. Through a competency-based curriculum and supervision by mentor teams, these three seminaries have effectively enabled an on-the-job seminary. A specific claim from CBTE schools is that their programs more effectively train pastors to engage “real world” themes about work such as stewardship, finance, money management, vocation, theology of work and economics. This paper describes the on-the-job components of the three CBTE schools, documents claims about faith-at-work themes being covered through the on-the-job format itself, then normalizes data from their curricula to see to what extent they have put faith-at-work themes in the forefront. Initial analysis indicates that the CBTE schools are both confident that such themes are visited in the OTJ format and that their programs are actually designed to maximize the faith-at-work inflection, accounting for up to a tenth of the content of the Master of Divinity degree program.

Much of the blame for the Sunday-Monday chasm has been laid at the feet of Christian seminaries. Instead of training clergy to engage marketplace realities, the critique goes, seminaries have rehearsed prophetic critiques of business structures or, more commonly, simply remained mum on matters of work. David Miller documents the lacuna in various Protestant schools, adding that “[w]hile seminaries recognize and even ordain clergy to specialized ministries as chaplains in hospitals, retirement homes, the military, and prisons, few consider the workplace as a *theologically valid venue* for ordained ministry.”¹ In the same vein, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization laments, “Existing models of theological education are mostly contemplative models that emphasize ‘withdrawal from the world’ in contrast with an experiential mode of learning.” Judging that the problem is the mode of seminary, not just the content, the committee enjoins, “We need to take the contextual realities in which ministry takes place seriously, and shape our educational pursuits accordingly.”² That is to say, if one wants to see seminaries more serious about workplace theology, get clergy learning experientially, in the workplace.

¹ David Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97, emphasis added.

² Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Marketplace Ministry,” occasional paper 40 (2004), 4.3.

Thus it is significant that in recent years three graduate theological schools - Northwest Baptist Seminary (British Columbia), Sioux Falls Seminary (South Dakota) and Grace Theological Seminary (Indiana) - have taken the bold step to translate seminary fully into the workplace setting. Under the name CBTE (competency-based theological education), they have couched their training within the actual life of local churches, parachurch organizations and businesses, that is, into the ministry setting where students are already working.

In the general sense CBTE schools are not doing anything new. There have been various efforts by Protestant seminaries seeking to implement an on-the-job (OTJ) component, including and especially in their flagship pastoral degree program, the master of divinity. Certain seminaries have designated credit hours for supervised ministry or practica or curated work experiences such as clinical pastoral education. Others have devoted more significant segments of time to contextual ministerial training, either through a year-long internship or hundreds of hours of field experience. The idea is, among other things, that OTJ training results in ministers with healthy conceptions of work, administration and stewardship. Yet one wonders about the force of this strategy, given that such experiences tend to come at the end of the program, are limited in duration, and usually skirt marketplace interaction in favor of more service-oriented functions (e.g., hospital visits, counseling youth, organizing food drives).³ The modest fruit these elements tend to bear for the Faith at Work Movement threatens to be further lessened by the move away from traditional in-context components.

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It is significant, then, that three North American graduate theological schools have pioneered a deeply contextualized learning model. Northwest Baptist Seminary (British Columbia), Sioux Falls Seminary (South Dakota) and Grace Theological Seminary (Indiana) have each designed a fresh approach in which seminary training takes place almost entirely within one's ministry context. Each program is *contextual*, with low residency requirements and adaptability of the curriculum. Students are already working in a ministry context while in school, and are expected to do seminary-level learning in tandem with their actual tasks. To facilitate the contextual model, each program is also *mentor-led*, using three mentors to oversee the student's progress over the duration of the whole program. Importantly, each program has abandoned the course-based model in favor of a *competency-based* model in which students get credit when they achieve proficiency in an area. This final dimension has led the three schools to brand their way of doing things as competency-based theological education (CBTE). Yet I suggest it is really the first feature, their contextual approach, that

³ Cf. James L. Boyce and Richard W. Nysse, "Preparing Leaders for Mission: The Experience of Assessment at Luther Seminary," *Theological Education* 41:2 (2006): 43.

⁴ A number of schools report reducing credit hours in the MDiv, often at the expense of contextualized learning (cf. Chris A. Meinzer, "The Impact on Enrollment of Reducing MDiv Hours," <https://www.ats.edu/blog/data-matters/impact-enrollment-reducing-mdiv-credit-hours>). This while students are working at higher rates than ever - including 27% of full-time MDiv students, an increase of over 1/5th from a decade before (Duration [Reduced Credit MDiv] Peer Group Final Report, Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education, Association of Theological Schools [2017]).

is most decisive in setting them apart as unique experiments. The bottom line is that Northwest Baptist, Sioux Falls, and Grace Theological have effectively produced an on-the-job seminary.

CBTE schools often make two claims related to workplace. First, they promise to meet students where they are at by enabling most of their seminary training to be done in their work context. Second - and this more quietly and internally - they suggest that their contextual programs empower students to look differently at faith-at-work themes, themes such as stewardship, financial management, economics, vocation (beyond the church), theology of work, and cultural transformation. Accordingly, this paper undertakes a couple of purposes. After describing on-the-job components of the three CBTE schools, it documents claims and anecdotal evidence about faith-at-work themes being covered through the on-the-job format itself. This study also normalizes data from their curricula to see to what extent CBTE schools have put faith-at-work themes in the forefront. Initial analysis indicates that the three graduate theological schools schools in question are both confident that the OTJ format itself promotes faith-at-work elements *and* that their programs are actually designed to maximize the faith-at-work inflection. I find that, after normalizing data, faith-at-work material accounts for up to a tenth of the total content of the MDiv.

OTJ Features of the CBTE Schools

Those new to the CBTE model can find themselves bewildered by the different way of doing seminary. Immerse (Northwest Baptist Seminary), Kairos (Sioux Falls Seminary) and Deploy (Grace Theological Seminary) do not require courses, do not issue grades, do not have strict timelines, and do not have much of a residential requirement. Rather, they exhibit features rarely seen in mainstream education:

- a competency-based curricular structure
- a pass/fail format
- a flexible timeline in which students complete competencies at his or her own pace
- a low residency requirement of a handful of on-campus intensives

Common to Immerse, Kairos and Deploy, then, are features of competency-based education (CBE), a structure that has been utilized since the 1970s.⁵ CBE thinks in terms of discrete learning goals which are mastered by students. Credit is granted to students upon demonstration of proficiency without regard to investment of time or participation level. Competencies can be conceived of as small, simple units that are “stacked” or as larger, complex competencies that focus on integration of learning.⁶

⁵ For more on CBE history, see T.R. Nodine, “How Did We Get Here?: A Brief History of Competency-based Higher Education in the United States,” *The Journal of Competency-based Education* 1:1 (Apr 2016): 5-11. For a description of CBTE and recommendations related thereto, see Competency-Based Education Final Peer Group Report, Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education, Association of Theological Schools (2017). Over 600 institutions of higher learning now implement CBE, represented by giants such as Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University. For more about the state of CBE, see C-BEN (<https://www.cbenetwork.org>).

⁶ Interestingly, while most CBE schools have preferred the former, Immerse, Kairos and Deploy alike prioritize the larger, complex competencies. Kairos alone has uncompounded, discrete competences, though it too groups them together under second-tier integrated competencies called “outcomes.”

More germane to this study, the programs aim for an on-the-job mode for their students. The program requirements from each school are united in four features. First, students are required to have a ministry context. Whether paid or not, whether full time or not, students are only accepted into the program if they have a hands-on learning environment. Second, the MDiv curriculum from each school⁷ provides many assignments that are intended to be done in context. While much of the inputs are localized only that they are accessible online (e.g., a video lecture or article), many of the outputs (the assignment artifacts to demonstrate proficiency) are deeply contextual. For example, the curricula call for sermons, lessons, ministry manuals, planning documents, interviews and pastoral care sessions. Artifacts are to be composed on the job and documented in appropriate ways. Third, each program permits and even encourages students to adapt the curriculum. Much of the content, both inputs and outputs, may be modified in order to be maximally relevant for the student. For instance, a student might propose to substitute the organizing of (and critical reflection on) a backpacks-for-kids program in the place of a missions assignment. Fourth, CBTE schools use a mentor team model. Immerse, Kairos and Deploy surround each student with three mentors. One is an academic mentor who works for the seminary, while the other two are contextual mentors, overseeing some element of the student's personal and/or professional life. The intention is that the mentor triad will reinforce the student's learning in the flow of active ministry.

A few unique features of each program are worth noting. Immerse was launched in 2012 by Northwest Baptist Seminary, designed as a means of restoring trust with the churches of the Fellowship Pacific denomination of Canada, a consortium of over a hundred Baptist churches. It has expanded to other free church groups. Immerse's OTJ flavor is thoroughly shaped by its congregational commitment. A church is established as a partner to the seminary, then that church chooses students (staff or promising lay leaders) it wishes to send into Immerse. Aside from financial contribution, a church shows its responsibility for the student by providing a staff person as mentor and arranging learning opportunities for the student. Immerse establishes a denominational representative as the third mentor. Their assessment process is conducted almost entirely by the mentor team (albeit with the help of task-specific rubrics). In sum, they hope to offer "a fully church-based training system" to their partner denominations.⁸

Sioux Falls Seminary began Kairos (née Kairos Project) in 2014, drawing substantially from the Immerse model. Yet Kairos adopted a more student-centric model in which students were recruited directly and were encouraged to nominate their own mentors (faculty mentor usually excepted). Mentor teams were and are of paramount importance, having full control of oversight and assessment over the course of the entire program. "Ministry context" was from the beginning interpreted in the broadest possible sense, including all types of work as potential ministry arenas. For example, Kairos's first class of students included two real estate agents and a maxillofacial surgeon. The student-centric ethos comes out in Kairos's willingness to adapt content - not just inputs and outputs, but even the

⁷ For this study I examine Immerse's standard MDiv (August 2017 revision), Kairos MDiv 4.0 (2017-18), and Deploy's initial MDiv curriculum (2018).

⁸ "Immerse," <https://www.nbseminary.ca/programs/immerse>.

competencies themselves. Yet Kairos was also quite free with the *in situ* format; from 2016 on students were permitted to substitute traditional courses, either in person or online, for blocks of competencies. In all these ways Kairos presents itself as a radically flexible, customizable seminary option.

Deploy, the CBTE initiative of Grace Theological Seminary, just saw its official launch in fall 2018. A two-and-a-half year planning process has expressed clear intentions to learn from Immerse and Kairos while finding its own path. Deploy has deep training and support structures (including pay) for all its mentors. Additionally, a Student Life Coordinator makes weekly contact with each student. It has already implemented the use of extension campus sites so as to maximize the local embodiment of the program.

Faith-at-Work Claims via the OTJ Format

Differences notwithstanding, all three CBTE schools are adamant that students will be enabled to pursue most of their seminary training in their work context. Northwest Baptist Seminary contends that “[i]nstead of adding a list of academic tasks to a person’s already-full ministry plate, Immerse begins by asking what the student is already doing and shaping leadership development to that context.”⁹ Sioux Falls Seminary explains that “coursework is typically completed in context” with all the school’s resources meant “to supplement or enhance in-context work.”¹⁰ And Grace Theological Seminary is totally up front in the form of its tag line, “Pursue mastery without pausing ministry,” described as students “participat[ing] in active service opportunities within the local church where they will document, dialogue and deconstruct their experiences.”¹¹ The OTJ setting is indispensable, not incidental, to the philosophy of CBTE.

Interviewing leaders in the three schools, I heard a consistently positive message regarding faith-at-work themes. Each leader was asked if the structure of the program facilitated the discussion of topics such as stewardship, finance, money management, vocation, theology of work, and economics. “CBTE students are more connected with such ideas and experiences than a classroom student would be,” said Howard Andersen of Northwest Baptist. “He is immersed in reality all the time.” Immerse overseer Trent Erickson agreed, maintaining that “the mode of delivery is closely related to the content.” Erickson scanned 25 mentor teams and found that six of them (about a quarter) had a businessperson on the team. At Sioux Falls Seminary, the mean age for MDiv students is late thirties, which helps to account for the fact that nearly all of the students have deep work experience, including in for-profit business entities. (During my four years in Kairos, 2014-18, I rarely encountered a student who had not spent time in both professional ministry *and* the general workforce.) Thus most of the students were already thinking about matters of stewardship, vocation and finance/money management, and to a lesser extent work-theology and economics. Kairos’s

⁹ “Why Immerse,” <https://www.nbseminary.ca/programs/immerse/why-immerse>.

¹⁰ Kairos Project Guide, July 2017, 2.

¹¹ Deploy Viewbook (2018).

contextual model simply kept workplace issues before students. In Sioux Falls Seminary COO Nathan Helling words, “It takes a relationships earned over time to be able to ask real questions about stewardship and personal finance. Program-long mentor communities facilitate these real conversations and lead to real transformation.” Grace Theological Seminary met with three business professors from the undergraduate programs as they crafted their competencies. Jeffrey Gill indicated that this was a response to local pastors who were dismayed that seminary was simply unhelpful for executive pastors and ministry leaders of Christian non-profits whose work was focused on administration, marketing and finance. Thus for all three CBTE schools, their model has anticipated greater levels of church-business integration.

Anecdotal evidence from students echoes the claims of CBTE seminary staff. Virtually every student I interviewed came up with instant examples of ways their mentor teams were facilitating business-sensitive conversations. Craig, a student mid-stride in his CBTE MDiv program, says he has been drawn to faith-at-work themes on account of a background in two corporations. It also helps that one of his mentors is a retired AT&T executive, who regularly reminds Craig that many of his ministry ideas need to achieve higher levels of feasibility and efficiency. Another student, Zach, reports that his MDiv has helped him to think soberly about fundraising and matters of business planning. “It’s not just about hypotheticals,” he says. “The program gets you to find what works.” Students at CBTE schools tend to think in terms of integration, seeing overlapping spheres of concern. Lin, a student who also works in the financial sector, sees integration at every turn: “We tend to bifurcate our lives into our work life, family life, our church life - and that doesn’t really work. My theological education is helping me to become a better leader in my work.” In students’ minds, on-the-job seminaries assure high levels of business engagement by virtue of the contextual format itself.

Faith-at-Work Content in the CBTE Curricula

Anecdotal evidence of faith-work integration is encouraging, but it only goes so far. What about the actual content of CBTE schools? Are faith-at-work themes actually being prescribed as inputs (content that is taught and reinforced) and outputs (artifacts that are evaluated)? Given the centrality of the contextual, mentor-based model, one would expect to find a significant percentage of the content dealing explicitly with topics of stewardship, finance, money management, vocation, theology of work, and economics. Moreover, two of the three schools (Sioux Falls Seminary and Grace Theological Seminary) have received grants from Kern Family Foundation for the explicit purpose of implementation of themes surrounding “faith, work and economics.” Are such themes discernable in their MDiv templates?

It should be stated straightaway that normalizing data for CBTE schools poses a challenge. None of the schools operates fundamentally through the normal measuring sticks: courses, credit hours, actual hours. Instead, they speak in terms of competencies and assignments and idiosyncratic time units associated with assignments. Further complicating the situation is that the three programs

use different sizes of competencies. Kairos has small, tightly defined units (which they call “targets”) amounting to 200 competencies, where Immerse and Deploy have large, compounded units amounting to 27 and 18 competencies, respectively. Yet another complication is that the programs permit varying levels of curricular customization, meaning not every student is assured to have received the same inputs or produce the same outputs.

Even so, I maintain that there are ways of normalizing data. Each of the schools has keys, either in the curriculum itself or as an institutional document, that transpose competencies, assignments, credit hours and actual hours. Each school has a Rosetta Stone, so to speak. By combing through each MDiv curriculum and processing it through a standardization tool, it is possible to get various quantitative indicators.

For the following I have identified curricular content that explicitly matches the faith-at-work themes. Three measurements can be taken. First, I calculate reduced competency units (RCUs), by which I mean the equivalent of the minimal, uncompounded competency.¹² Second, each program’s MDiv curriculum describes work-units that can be converted to actual hours. Third, by way of translation, the actual hours can be converted to traditional semester-based credit hours. Each of these numbers can be rendered as a percentage of total program content. As a control, I do not account for levels of adaptability, presupposing that materials that a student substitutes in will be as likely to intersect with faith-at-work concerns as the things they substitute out. These data are represented in Appendix 1.

Looking at the results, one notices immediately that each CBTE curriculum for the MDiv reports a significant percentage of competencies devoted explicitly to faith-at-work themes (5.5%/10.8%/4.4%). Notably, Kairos in particular devotes over a tenth of its seminary curriculum to such themes. The significant percentage of competencies devoted to faith-at-work themes is made even more significant by the fact that competencies are learning goals that are evaluated, meaning that students are not just *hearing* about faith-at-work knowledge, attitudes and skills; they are *demonstrating proficiency* in them.

When calculated as actual hours of study expected from students around these competencies, faith-at-work content makes up a comparable percentage (3.7%, 12.7%, N/A). Immerse’s lower percentage here simply means that they have relatively low amount of activity (inputs and outputs) compared to their number of competencies. In Kairos the higher percentage suggests a relatively high amount of activity compared to the competencies. Again, Sioux Falls Seminary’s track builds in the most faith-at-work content, in part a product, I suggest, of their long relationship with Kern Family Foundation and Oikonomia Network. The three curricula, in any case, virtually guarantee that a student will spend time reflecting on workplace content.

¹² Since this is the most navigable (and typical sized unit for CBE schools), I will use it as the baseline currency. Kairos utilizes this size unit for nearly all its competencies. Immerse offers a functional equivalent through its Outcome Development Assignments (ODAs). Deploy at this time has not identified all its sub-competency units, including assignments; I have multiplied their 18 competencies by ten, then calculated a percentile of each competency to come up with a faith-at-work content quotient.

In sum, Appendix 1 gives clear indication that CBTE schools are taking seriously faith-at-work at the curricular level. The self-reporting about content in the OTJ model bears out in their on-paper content. Further research is warranted. For one, a broader and more longitudinal study of students in CBTE programs would help to assess how much content is sticking. Also helpful would be a comparison of the data presented here to the faith-at-work content of traditional MDiv programs of similar-sized evangelical seminaries. For the moment, this study concludes that CBTE schools are doing more than hoping for workplace integration. Through a contextual model and intentional curricula, they are planning on it.

Appendix 1: CBTE Schools

	RCUs	tRCUs	RCU%	AHs	tAHs	AH%	CHE	tCHE	CHE%
Immerse	13.5	243	5.5%	135	3654	3.7%	3.2	87	3.7%
Kairos	23	212	10.8%	401	3150	12.7%	9.5	75	12.7%
Deploy	8	180	4.4%	N/A*	3375	N/A*	N/A*	90	N/A*

RCU = faith-at-work content as reduced competency units

tRCUs = total reduced competency units in the program

RCU% = $RCU/tRCUs$

AHs = faith-at-work content as actual hours

tAHs = total actual hours in program

AH% = $AHs/tAHs$

CHE = credit hour equivalence of actual hours (42AHs = 1 CH; Deploy, 37.5AHs = 1 CH)

tCHE = total credit hour equivalence

CHE% = $CHE/tCHE$

* As of the presentation of this study, Deploy had not completed the entire first draft of the assignments associated with its competencies.