

# Empower

## USER GUIDE

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CERTIFICATE & MASTER OF ARTS IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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**CALVIN**  
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# 01 Competency-Based Theological Education

Ancient leadership training in the church was intended to be reproductive—pastors equipped pastors who, in turn, equipped more pastors. Paul trains Timothy and tells him to entrust his training to others. The form of training was life-on-life—an apprenticeship in which a seasoned pastor disciplined and mentored an emerging leader as they did ministry, prayed, and studied Scripture together.

This “apprenticeship” model was used for centuries and it had numerous advantages. Character, skills, and knowledge were constantly developed together. There was continuous modeling and guidance in a pastoral way of life. The training was contextual—deeply embedded in the life of a local church.

For most of church history, seminaries as we know them – the “university” model – never existed. It was only in recent centuries that the university model has replaced the apprenticeship model in some parts of the world.

But now there is a new movement in North American theological education called Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE). This model combines the strengths of the apprenticeship and university models. CBTE is an ancient-future form of training that is embraced by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accrediting body.

Calvin Theological Seminary has joined this movement. Through collaborative partnership with ministry leaders, we developed Empower and launched our pilot in 2022. The core vision of Empower is to support the equipping and discipling of leaders for the local church. We do this using a competency-based format that brings together the strengths of both the apprenticeship and university models.

## How Empower Works

Students work with a three-person mentor team to develop competencies for ministry. The team coaches the student through the learning path, taking into account the student’s prior experience, individual strengths and growth areas, ministry context, vocational goals, and more. The student and team might follow or adapt the Standard Path for achieving competence. The Standard Path has learning experiences designed to cultivate student learning and proficiency within the student’s ministry context. Though a student is supported by the mentor team, successful students in the Empower program are self-motivated.

### Students who participate in Empower are:

**Empowered in Personal Formation:** Throughout a student’s learning experience, mentorship and personal growth are at the heart of the program.

**Empowered to Multiply the Church:** As students are shaped for ministry, they cultivate communities of disciples. The reason for this intensive learning process is to equip leaders for the church, both in ordained ministry and through the priesthood of all believers.

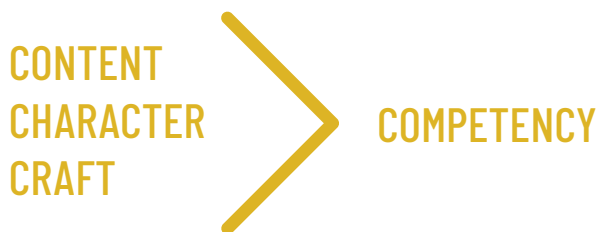
**Empowered to Flourish:** When students walk this learning path of competency-based education at the seminary, what fruit does it produce in their lives and work? It is our hope that they walk forward empowered to flourish, both personally and in ministry.

# 02 Empower Distinctives and Values

Empower is designed to make theological education more collaborative, flexible, accessible, integrated, and practical. These values shape the student experience. High standards are maintained through a robust process of feedback and assessment as students develop holistically.

## Competency-Based Design

The entire student experience and program design center on guiding a student toward achieving interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and integrated competencies. These competencies each encapsulate a combination of knowledge, character, and skill. Students complete a program when they are able to demonstrate sufficient competence in all program competencies.



The student learning path consists of learning experiences, which are designed to help a student develop and demonstrate observable behaviors that show progress toward achieving a particular competency. These experiences can include various combinations of instruction, interaction, and ministry practice.

When the student and mentor team believe the student has defined, developed, and demonstrated sufficient competence in a program competency, the student will complete a Master Assessment. This process will help the mentor team determine whether a student has achieved sufficient competence or whether that student needs to continue developing in this area.

## Contextual Formation

At its core, the Empower learning path is a journey of discipleship. In this way, holistic, integrated learning should happen in the student's ministry context as much as possible. Rather than leave one's ministry context in order to "go to seminary," Empower helps students to cultivate and maximize their learning in-context. By participating in Empower, students add structure, accountability, team support, and new perspectives to their learning.

## Customized Training

Learning and assessment are individualized to meet the diverse needs of diverse students. Students are not required to re-learn what they have already learned or demonstrated.

## Team Mentoring

A team of three mentors work together to guide, coach, and assess a student's development of program competencies. The mentor team is committed to the student's long-term formation and is intentionally diverse in order to provide the student with multidimensional support, perspective, and feedback. The mentor team consists of a faculty mentor and two others who are invested in the student's context and growth.

Mentors play a crucial role in the learning process. They help students to identify and process in-context learning and to adapt learning experiences for

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## 02 Empower Distinctives and Values

their context. Mentors also monitor progress toward a competency and provide valuable feedback and assessment. Through a Master Assessment process, the mentor team determines when a student has achieved competency.

Calvin Seminary and the broader church are consistently collaborating throughout a student's entire program. The mentors must all affirm student competency in various areas in order for the student to proceed in the program.

### Ministry Partners

During the initial pilot phase of the Empower program, students must participate through an Empower partner. Ministry partners will invite students to apply to the program.

### NOTES

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# 03 Curriculum Structure

Students can earn the Certificate in Christian Leadership and the Master of Arts in Christian Leadership degree through the Empower track. Both programs consist of a set of standard required competencies. In order to achieve competency in these areas, students follow an iterative process of learning and development. The emphasis is on demonstrating competence within the student's ministry context. Not all students will take the same path to develop and achieve these competencies.

The Certificate "stacks" into the Master of Arts. In other words, when a student has achieved competence in the Certificate Program competencies, they are halfway toward earning the Master of Arts.

Students can choose to have an area of concentration listed on their transcript when they earn their certificate or degree. Typically, students will work with their mentor team to establish this area of concentration. Students and mentor teams will determine a set of Adapted Learning Experiences that focus on this particular area of concentration.

## Competencies

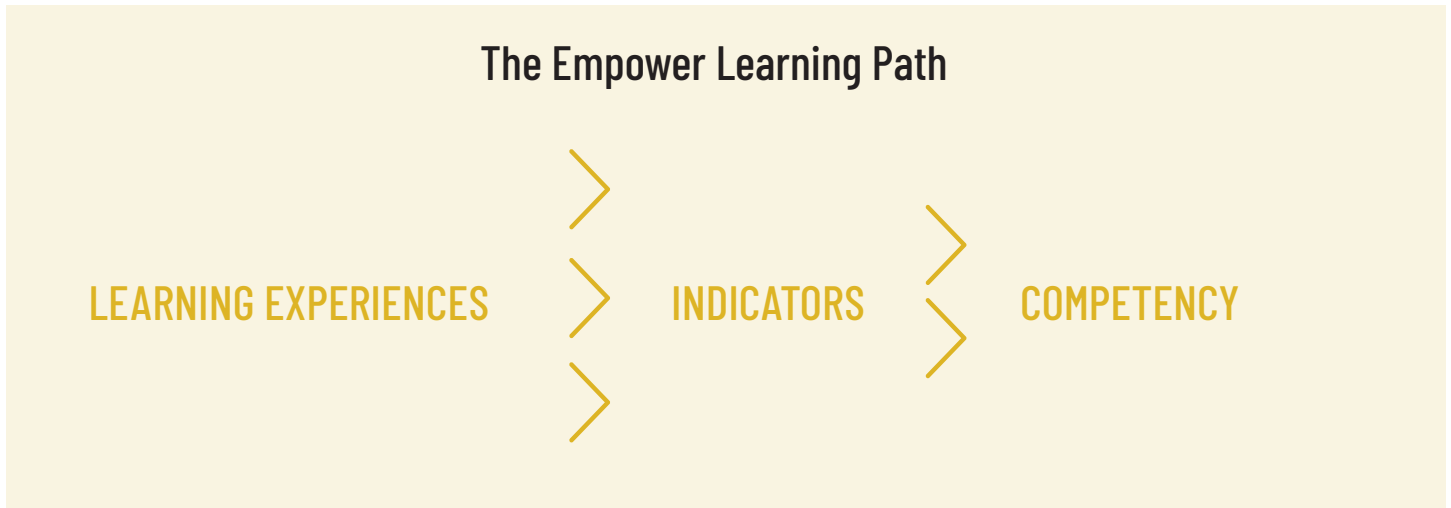
The M.A. in Christian Leadership and the Certificate in Christian Leadership are guided entirely by competencies. Though the target competencies are consistent for each student, the particular path each student takes to achieve competency may vary. Mentoring, feedback, learning plans, and Adapted Learning Experiences all orient toward the student's competency development. Students earn academic credit when they have developed and achieved competence in a particular program competency. These competencies are interdisciplinary and integrated by design.

## Indicators

Indicators are specific, observable behaviors that demonstrate movement toward a competency. Students meet these learning indicators along their way to developing and achieving competence.

## Learning Experiences

Learning experiences include a range of activities and interactions that are intentionally designed to help students develop competence. Students demonstrate competence by exhibiting indicators of their learning. The student can propose Adapted Learning Experiences for the mentor team to approve. Adapted Learning Experiences provide the student and mentors the flexibility to better contextualize a learning path.



### Standard and Partner Learning Paths

**Standard Path:** Competency-based education allows for flexible and varied paths toward developing and demonstrating program competencies. At the same time, the Calvin Seminary faculty have developed the Standard Path for each program competency in the Certificate in Christian Leadership and the M.A. in Christian Leadership. The path outlines specific learning indicators and learning experiences that students and their mentor team can follow or adapt.

**Partner Paths:** Calvin Seminary collaborates with ministry partners to adapt the Standard Path and form Partner Paths. As a part of this process, partners may want to adapt the learning indicators and learning experiences to ensure they closely align with the ministry partner's specific context. All Partner Paths guide students to the same program competencies as the Standard Path. This way, Empower maintains consistent, intentional program design while also offering flexible and contextual learning.

### Resources

Throughout our pilot of Empower, we will be developing resources and making them available to assist students and mentors. Among the resources are library tutorials, how-to instruction, research tutorials, and more.

# 04 Development & Assessment Process

Each student's learning path keeps the goals and objectives of a particular competency in front of the student and mentor team as they walk together through the program. Due to the flexible nature of competency-based education, students can customize and contextualize their learning path toward achieving competency by adapting learning experiences or creating new ones. However, the competency title and description as well as the competency statement and learning indicators remain the same.

Learning indicators require students to develop and demonstrate aspects of content, character, and craft in an integrated way. The development process describes what students typically experience as they progress toward achieving competence. Regardless of the competency, the process of development remains the same:

- Understand the competency and its definition
- Assess prior learning
- Identify areas for growth
- Identify resources
- Develop a learning path of indicators and experiences
- Assess and adjust
- Conduct a Master Assessment

### Adapted Learning Experiences

Adapted Learning Experiences are a common way that students and their mentor teams are able to ensure that the program is flexible and specific to particular student contexts. Together, students and mentor teams may substitute learning experiences from the program's Standard Path and/or Partner Paths.

Adapted Learning Experiences help students and mentor teams to make adjustments based on student learning goals, a particular ministry situation or context, or to demonstrate and document prior learning or experience in a particular area.

Adapted Learning Experiences should fulfill the same essential purpose as a single existing learning experience or group of learning experiences in the curriculum. Adapted Learning Experiences do not replace existing learning indicators with new ones. They are simply an alternative way to demonstrate the same learning indicator.

Adapted Learning Experiences are not a way to earn credit for previous work. Work submitted for an Adapted Learning Experience must be new work. A student may revise versions of past work, but the revisions should be done in a way that is intentionally designed to replace a specific learning experience. In other words, the revisions must demonstrate new learning since the original project. All Adapted Learning Experiences must be documented in the CTS online learning management system, Canvas, and approved by the mentor team.

Adapted Learning Experiences are encouraged. Although mentor teams can provide guidance and support in creating an Adapted Learning Experience, the initiative begins and ends with the student.

*Appendix 1 has specific information about proposing and evaluating Adapted Learning Experiences.*

### Master Assessment

Together, the student and mentor team determine when the student is ready to be assessed for a particular competency. This happens when a student has demonstrated a sufficient level of learning indicators for that competency. The mentor team will determine the means through which the Master Assessment will take place. Often, this is done through a Master Assessment review.

The Master Assessment review is similar to an oral assessment or defense of a competency that reviews the work a student has completed throughout the competency and/or by concentrating on a particular lengthy learning experience that best exemplifies the competency. (This is determined at the mentor team's discretion).

Ordinarily, Master Assessment reviews take 1-2 hours. They include:

- Completion of the Master Assessment Rubric individually by the student and each member of the mentor team.
- Further discussion about whether or not the mentor team feels the student has achieved competence in the particular competency.
- The online entry of the agreed upon Master Assessment score by the faculty mentor.

If a student does not pass the Master Assessment, the mentor team will provide actionable feedback and may assign additional work or learning experiences before the student can complete a reassessment. Details on the scoring and passing requirements can be found on the Master Assessment Rubric on Canvas.

Upon passing the assessment, the faculty mentor officially completes and submits the online Master Assessment Results Form. The Academic Office officially records completion and awards academic credit.



# 05 Mentor Teams

Mentor teams are a key part of Empower. Faculty mentors are appointed by CTS. Empower staff will work with ministry partners and students to form each mentor team.

Mentor nominees will complete an online application and consent form. The application gathers information about the personal and vocational experiences of the mentor nominee.

CTS representatives will determine whether the nominees are suitable. Nominations may be deferred to the dean or discussed with faculty if needed. CTS reserves the right to refuse nominees or elect other suitable replacements. Family members are not eligible to serve and recommendations of family members will not be accepted.

## Mentor Requirements and Criteria

Mentor teams should be strategically assembled to be diverse enough to facilitate holistic learning and development in the student. Therefore, mentors will have different qualifications and perspectives from which to support student formation. Mentors must commit to walking alongside students for the duration of their learning journey, typically 2-3 years for the M.A. degree.

- All mentors should have a rooted Christian faith that informs how they live the Christian life.
- Typically, faculty mentors are members of the CTS faculty. All faculty mentors are approved by CTS faculty. In most cases, they have an earned doctorate. Faculty mentors are able to integrate scholarly research with practice and formation. They are skilled in integration.

- The other two mentors should be intimately engaged in the student's current context and/or role. Often supervisors, leaders, seasoned colleagues, or others who have a deep familiarity with the student's life and work are chosen as mentors.
- Mentors will benefit from having discipleship experience - either formally or informally.
- Mentors must have at least four hours per month available to commit to Empower.

## Mentor Expectations

Mentors work together as a team of three. Each mentor is responsible for reviewing each competency to provide constructive, honest, and thorough feedback to the student. Each mentor discusses academic performance, vocational minis-

try practice, and personal development and well-being. The following tasks are the essential responsibilities of the mentor team.

**Engage Regularly:** Mentor teams must engage with the student in regular, substantive, and consistent ways in order to continually assess and encourage. Interactions can be in-person, online, or over phone and email. Time and support are essential to student success. Mentors are expected to spend at least four hours per month participating in their role.

**Review Content, Character, and Craft:** Mentor teams review the student's projects and learning progress collectively. After a student has completed a project or learning experience, the mentor team will determine whether the project or submitted work is satisfactory for meeting the goals of the learning indicator. The arrangement of roles for assessing particular projects is up to the mentor team and can be changed as needed.

**Authorize Adapted Learning Experiences:** Mentors work with students to insert or adapt learning experiences that better align with the student's particular context and ministry. Students carry primary responsibility for creating Adapted Learning Experiences, however mentors are able to assist, coach, and guide students in developing them. The entire mentor team will review and approve changes.

**Supervise Progress:** Mentors are responsible for monitoring student progress and for helping them to keep momentum toward their learning goals. Mentors help students find areas where their life and work intersect with their theological education. These areas can be rich for Adapted Learning Experiences.

**Conduct Master Assessments:** Mentor teams discuss student requests for Master Assessments and help students put their plans for assessment into action. When the mentor team confirms that a student is ready for a Master Assessment, the faculty mentor will oversee the implementation of

the assessment process. As a result of the assessment process, the mentor team will have deeply reviewed areas of content, character, and craft within the program competency.

### Mentor Team Good Practices

Each mentor team and student will have a unique experience in Empower. For example, meeting frequency and format may vary from team to team. It may evolve for a particular student and mentor team as well.

**Team Meetings** - Some teams may meet regularly for shorter meetings. Others may meet less frequently for significantly longer meetings. The mentor team should meet regularly enough to experience substantive interaction that empowers a student to move through their learning journey at a pace that works for the student. Monthly mentor team meetings paired with timely feedback throughout the month is a combination that works for many. A team should meet with the student at least quarterly. Often, students will meet more frequently with their mentor team early in the learning journey. This allows a strong group dynamic to form. It is also common for students and their mentor teams to meet more regularly in the time leading up to a Master Assessment and at the end of their program.

**Team Dynamic** - Mentor teams are intended to be student-centered. In other words, student needs and preferences should guide how meetings are structured. It is the responsibility of everyone at the meeting to ensure that the meetings with the student are helpful. Concerns should be addressed in a timely manner as they arise.

**Team Communication** - Mentors should aim to have an initial meeting within two weeks of starting the program. When students have a time-sensitive deadline, they should make that known to the mentor team. The mentor team can determine

the best way to communicate and provide feedback on learning experiences.

The student's educational work and progression toward competence are facilitated through Canvas, the CTS online learning management system. This is where students and mentor teams can communicate, discuss and review work, and monitor progress toward competency. Though there is a record of submitted work on Canvas, students are strongly encouraged to set up a shared drive to store their own work.

Mentor teams will document student progress in demonstrating learning indicators and competencies and record official assessments on Canvas. Some mentors may also prefer to leave feedback in the Speedgrader section of Canvas.

### Mentor Support

**Mentor Toolbox** - Mentors will receive program updates via email. Empower will regularly add learning resources for mentors to the Mentor Toolbox course on Canvas.

**Bi-Weekly Zoom Sessions** - We are all on a lifelong journey of learning. Therefore, we offer bi-weekly Zoom sessions for mentors to learn, laugh, pray, and share successes and challenges. We will keep summaries of themes and lessons learned and add them to the Mentor Toolbox course on Canvas. It is strongly recommended that mentors join at least once a month to ensure they are staying up-to-date and connected.

*Appendix 2 has specific information regarding mentor meetings and orientation.*

## Appendix 1: How to Propose and Evaluate Adapted Learning Experiences

### Proposal Process for Adapted Learning Experiences

1. Students initiate the process to adapt a learning experience by creating an Adapted Learning Experience Proposal on Canvas. The proposal will include the suggested learning experience, the proposed Adapted Learning Experience, and a few paragraphs explaining the rationale for the proposed adaptation. If the student developed the proposal in conversation with a mentor or mentor team, the student must still submit the proposal on Canvas.
2. Upon submission, the student should notify the mentors via email that the proposal for the Adapted Learning Experience was submitted.
3. Once the Adapted Learning Experience is approved and completed by the student, the student will return to the "Adapted Learning Experience" section of that particular program-level competency and indicator to submit the completed work for the learning experience.

### The Evaluation Process for Adapted Learning Activity Proposals

Mentors will maintain consistent, intentional program design while striving for flexibility. Calvin Seminary has worked with ministry leaders to develop and offer content and context-relevant learning experiences that are designed to align with indicators and program-level competencies.

Robust competency-based education relies on a strong link between program competencies, indicators, and well-designed and well-aligned learning experiences. A well-designed and well-aligned learning experience will drive student learning that fits with the intended learning indicators and program level competencies. The following guiding questions can help teams in their evaluation of proposals for Adapted Learning Experiences.

1. Does this Adapted Learning Experience move the student toward the learning indicator and, ultimately, the competency? (In other words, is it well-aligned?)

A proposed learning experience may be well-designed to prompt learning, but it might not align with the intended learning indicator and program competency. Mentor teams should also consider how Adapted Learning Experiences might develop a student's content, character, and craft in an integrated way.

2. Does this Adapted Learning Experience require similar levels of competence and depth?

Often, the workload of an Adapted Learning Experience will be similar to the original learning experience (e.g., difficulty of book, time required, pages written). But this won't necessarily always be the case. However, the demonstrable competence of the student should be comparable to the original learning experience in terms of practice or insight.

## Appendix 2: How to Form a Mentor Team

Typically, mentor teams are formed and begin their work during the student orientation process. An Empower staff member will help students transition to their mentor team. The first meeting addresses these topics:

- **Get Acquainted** - Learn about each other's Christian life, ministry/vocation, church affiliation, relationship to the student, educational background, location, etc.
- **Review the Empower User Guide** - Go over each section and address any questions about the program.
- **Navigate Canvas** - Get familiar with the mechanics of Empower on Canvas, where to find content, how to process assessments, etc.
- **Discuss Mentor Team Culture** - Consider the format for meeting, meeting frequency, and any questions for the Mentor Team Covenant.



# Empower Competencies

## Discerning Context

Demonstrates awareness of how contextual factors influence ministry

## Biblically Wise

Knows, interprets, and applies the story of Scripture faithfully

## Making Disciples: Witnessing

Embodies a winsome witness and can articulate gospel presentations that respond to specific socio-cultural contexts and offer good news holistically

## Being Discipled

Exhibits growing conformity to Christ, self-awareness, and interpersonal intelligence

## Making Disciples: Training

Develops and carries out a plan for discipling others into a holistic path of formation

## Leading

Equips God's people to answer God's call to works of ministry

## Theologically Reflective

Understands and integrates Scripture, history, and theology with ministry practices

## Responsive Disciples

Responds to God's call to be ambassadors of reconciliation, healing, and transformation



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