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Leaders at theological schools that have received financial support from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship generally agree the Fellowship needed to reconsider how it relates to “partner” institutions.

But “the devil is in the details,” one administrator said, particularly for schools that stand to lose money if the CBF approves recommendations in a partnership study committee report.

The committee’s recommendations create a three-tiered approach to partnership for theological schools—identity partners, leadership partners and global partners. Schools in each category would be eligible for scholarships and collaborative initiative funding, as well as “relational resources” such as references and referrals. But only identity partners would be eligible for ongoing institutional funding, and no more than six of the 14 theological education partner schools could be designated as identity partners.

“Criteria for defining of these institutions will include factors such as enrollment, the number of graduates in congregational ministry, level of support for CBF, geographic location, willingness to self-identify as a CBF-affiliated school and historical connection to CBF,” the report states.

The Fellowship’s Coordinating Council will discuss and vote on the committee’s report at its June 29-30 meeting, prior to the annual CBF General Assembly in Grapevine, Texas. If the council approves the report, CBF Moderator Bob Setzer of First Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., plans to ask the General Assembly to affirm the action.

At least one freestanding seminary—Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond—fully anticipates being named as an identity partner based on its historic relationship to CBF and its size.

“I assume (Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond) would be one of the identity partners since we have been one of two institutions funded by CBF from the time of the adoption of their very first budget,” said President Tom Graves.

“We are also one of the largest of the seminary programs, enrolling over 325 students in our courses last academic year. We are proud of our relationship to CBF and are glad to be identified publicly as a CBF-related school.”

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond receives \$241,216 annually from CBF, which amounts to less than 10 percent of the school’s total budget but makes the Fellowship the seminary’s largest denominational source of funding, Graves noted. The seminary also receives \$177,424 from the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Graves voiced strong support for the study committee and its report.

“The financial well-being of CBF is a key to our own well-being,” he said.

“We do a disservice to jeopardize the financial stability of the CBF for the benefit of some of its related agencies. It is wise to understand that there must be limits to what the CBF can do for its partners.”

Of the remaining three freestanding seminaries that partner with CBF, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky appears sure to be a leadership partner, since its only funding from CBF is three leadership scholarships totaling \$15,000, said President Greg Earwood. International Baptist Theological Seminary almost certainly will be designated as a global partner, possibly along with Baptist University of the Americas. Global partners are schools developing leaders outside the United States or leaders within the United States whose first language is other than English, according to the study committee’s report.

Among freestanding seminaries, that leaves Central Baptist Theological Seminary, which hopes to be identified as an identity partner, according to President Molly Marshall.

“We are focused on the same strategic initiatives as CBF—faith formation, building community, developing leaders and missional outreach,” she said. “We are grateful for the sustaining support CBF has offered to Central in the past and trust that we will continue our strong partnership.”

Central Baptist Theological Seminary is seeking to align theological education with congregational needs, as demonstrated by its teaching church initiative, she added. First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Okla., and First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn., are part of the initiative to offer theological education in a local church context.

Marshall affirmed the Fellowship for “grappling honestly” with the matter of partnerships.

“I believe it is good stewardship for CBF to be asking how funding of theological institutions contributes to the goals and objectives of CBF

partnerships. Calling partners to accountability is a constructive way to align the whole organization for greater effectiveness," she said.

Six divinity schools or schools of theology at Baptist universities are CBF theological partners—Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology, Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, Gardner-Webb University's White School of Divinity, Campbell University Divinity School and Wake Forest Divinity School.

Leaders at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary "have some reason to believe Truett will get favorable treatment," said Dean Paul Powell, newly appointed special assistant to the president for denominational relations. "At least I hope so."

With 391 students enrolled, Truett is the largest theological school in partnership with CBF, Powell noted, adding that the school also has produced the most graduates. Truett has graduated 386 students since its founding, and it graduated 80 students last year.

In 2004-2005, Truett received \$167,348 from CBF.

Alan Culpepper, dean of the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, reported holding a preliminary meeting with CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal and Terry Hamrick, the Fellowship's coordinator for leadership development.

"But we did not talk about its effect on the allocation to McAfee," Culpepper said. "We have not yet received a formal invitation to be an identity partner, and I do not know what effect that might have on our budget status. I am sure all of this will be worked out in due time."

Other observers expressed confidence that McAfee and Truett likely would be named identity partners, probably along with Campbell University

Divinity School and White Divinity School at Gardner-Webb, based on the criteria outlined in the study committee report. If so, either Hardin-Simmons' Logsdon School or Wake Forest Divinity School could fail to be named as an identity partner.

Wake Forest understands that its ecumenical identity—expressed in its mission statement as “Christian by tradition, ecumenical in outlook, and Baptist in heritage”—will make the school a “second-tier” entity in the CBF’s eyes, said Dean Bill Leonard.

Wake Forest Divinity School currently receives \$20,000 from CBF, all of which goes to scholarship funds for students preparing for ministry in CBF-related churches, Leonard said. The school’s total annual budget is about \$1.5 million, and Leonard has “no idea” whether funding from CBF will increase or decrease, he said.

Since its founding 1999, the divinity school has graduated four classes of students—nearly half of them from CBF-related churches.

“Since 2002, we have given an average of \$75,086 per year to students related to CBF,” Leonard said. “The total average scholarship awards to CBF students for a three-year cycle is \$225,259. This means that the divinity school is raising its own scholarship funds that go to students connected to the CBF and carrying them financially far beyond the funding provided by CBF nationally. ...We will continue to work as best we can to secure scholarship aid for CBF related students who choose to join us.”

Irma Duke, communications and development director for Campbell, affirmed the partner study committee and its work. Duke, who serves on the CBF Coordinating Council, said she believes the committee “tried to provide more flexibility and accountability in the funding levels, and I sense that this is being accomplished.”

Campbell University Divinity School clearly asserts its identity as a CBF-

related school, and it promotes CBF missions and training opportunities to students and alumni, she added.

“CBF has been generous to us, and we are appreciative,” she said. “I hope that funding for the school and our students will not be reduced because it has allowed us the opportunity to do some things that we would have, otherwise, not been able to do. As a new school, the operational funding has been particularly helpful.”

Likely losers under the proposed three-tiered approach would be the Baptist studies programs at non-Baptist universities.

Duke Divinity School’s Baptist House of Studies expects to lose \$20,000 in institutional funding since “there is little question that the Baptist House at Duke will not be an identity partner,” given its formal relationship to the United Methodist Church, said Director Curtis Freeman.

By that understanding of the committee’s criteria, Baptist studies program at Texas Christian University’s Brite Divinity School and Emory University’s Candler School of Theology also would fail to qualify as identity partners. Brite is affiliated with the Disciples of Christ and Candler with the United Methodist Church.

Duke’s Baptist House already is making contingency plans to cope with the anticipated funding cut, Freeman noted.

“Our board of directors discussed the funding change at our spring meeting. We are in the initial stages of talking with churches and individuals who can make up the difference,” he said. “It may take a little time, but we’re discovering that our students make the best case for why Baptists need to support Duke. We’re hopeful that in the long run they will own the value of theological education for Baptists at Duke.”

Freeman took issue with the approach the partner study committee has

taken in its proposals. The committee chose to base partnership on a school's self-identification with CBF rather than the value a school brings to CBF-related churches, he asserted.

"My suggestion to the CBF leadership from the time I got to Duke was to consider funding partners based on the resources they provide to CBF and like-minded congregations. This seemed to be consistent with their stated aim to move beyond denominationalism," he said.

"What I proposed was for CBF to assess the level of their support for our partnership based the value of those leadership resources to CBF and like-minded congregations. The study committee has chosen a different direction, one that by contrast is most-denominational rather than post-denominational, as partnership will be defined primarily in terms of institutions that identify themselves as CBF entities."

If CBF eliminates institutional support for Duke Divinity School, "The only relationship between us and CBF besides shared ideas and convictions will be some scholarship support for students—right now at \$20,000," Freeman said.

"This is a good thing, but to put it in perspective, in terms of scholarship support for Duke students, CBF would rank either third or fourth behind several other organizations. Conversely, there are three or four congregations whose support for Baptist House together will be significantly more than CBF's support for scholarships. So all this will give us some pause as we reassess what partnership means for us, and how we understand our partnership with CBF."