

Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?

Report of the Educational Models Mapping the Workforce Survey

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Intro

Last year, as part of the Educational Models Workforce Mapping project, ATS conducted a first-of-its-kind study on alums from ATS schools. We surveyed 940 alums from 42 representative schools and two graduating classes (2015 and 2011), asking questions about their current job, what competencies they rely on, the degrees and credentials their employers required of them, and their coworkers.¹ This group of alums earned at least one degree from an ATS school: MDiv, MA-professional, MA-academic, or some kind of doctorate, representing well the proportions of degrees earned in ATS institutions. Earlier this year, Jo Ann Deasy reported on "[Where are Graduates Serving?](#)"

This month, we look at the *competencies* needed for the jobs that alums currently hold. Survey participants were asked the question: "In your current role, what skills/knowledge/dispositions do you rely on most heavily to do your work?"² It was an open-ended question, and respondents had opportunity to submit up to 10 possible answers.³ After coding what alums submitted and engaging in multiple conversations with ATS staff and research consultants, 46 competencies were identified. The following reports selected findings, by school type and by job.

What competencies do alums most heavily rely on?

Of the 46 competencies identified, 20 were named most frequently by the entire group of alums. Table 1 shows these competencies and how frequently the competency was named.⁴ Administration was named most frequently (605 times), then Spiritual disciplines (480), Theology (451), Pastoral care and counseling (448), Preaching (431), and so on. (Keep in mind that this list includes only the top 20, with an additional 26 less-frequently named competencies not shown here.)

Competency	How frequently the competency was named
Administration	605
Spiritual disciplines	480
Theology	451

¹ The 940 useable cases correspond to a 14% response rate (within range of the 10-20% national average for alumni/ae surveys). The response set was well represented by country and structure of the school, underrepresented by alums from evangelical Protestant schools (38% versus 44% in the database) and small (2% versus 20% in the database) and largest (5% versus 23% in the database) schools, and overrepresented by alums from mainline Protestant schools (40% versus 34% in the database) and mid-sized (36% versus 28% in the database) schools.

² Experts on competencies may not agree on our use of the word "competency" to stand in for skills, knowledge, or dispositions. For a fulsome treatment of competencies, see Korn Ferry's "For Your Improvement: Competencies Development Guide".

³ The responses were coded by multiple coders, from Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant contexts. Half the coders were also younger researchers, closer in age to the alums themselves, in hopes that they would help us better understand the aims and decisions of the alums.

⁴ Contact the author (gin@ats.edu) for full list of competencies and their definitions.

Pastoral care and counseling	448
Preaching	431
Leadership	373
Bible	362
Education and teaching	335
Active listening	328
Communication skills	240
Interpersonal competency	224
Finance	217
Formation	217
Conflict resolution	163
Intercultural competency	160
Quality job performance	149
Liturgics and worship	147
Intrapersonal competency	142
Difficult conversations	136
Organizational politics	128
...	...

To arrive at this list, participant responses were coded into broad categories, which meant that certain categories could show up multiple times for a given alum. For example, one alum reported “event planning”, “non-profit organization management skills”, and “supervision and management of leaders/staff” as competencies most needed for the job. Each of these was coded broadly as Administration, and this competency was counted three times for this alum. Coding into categories also meant that responses could be counted in multiple categories. For example, “prayer life—the ability to nurture my own spiritual needs” was coded as both Spiritual disciplines and Formation.

Some competencies in the list reflect just a few skills, knowledge, or dispositions; whereas, others include a wide range. Preaching, for example, included “preaching without a manuscript” (skill) and “theology of preaching” (understanding of homiletics). Leadership, however, incorporated responses ranging from “encouraging the congregation to be God’s people in this world” (congregational development) to “diplomacy w/faculty and administrators” (public leadership) and “leading organizational change and setting culture” (strategic skills and knowledge). Similarly, responses coded as Theology ranged from “worldview development” (apologetics) to “clarity on what and why the Church holds certain positions (debunking common misrepresentations)” (church doctrine or catechetics) to “moral and ethical values and teaching” (ethics or moral theology) and “applying theology to current events/cultural issues” (theological method).

So, while Administration was clearly the most frequently named, this may be due in part to the complex nature of administration and its related competencies.

Some of the competencies in the top 20 enjoy extensive coverage in the traditional four-fold curriculum⁵ followed by many schools: Theology, Bible, History, and (in some schools and/or degree

⁵ See, for example, R. L. Petersen (Ed) (1995) *Christianity & civil society* (The Boston Theological Institute) and chapters by Richard J. Mouw, Virginia L. Brereton, and R. Albert Mohler in *Theological education in the Evangelical tradition* (1996, Baker).

programs) Pastoral care and counseling. Other competencies, such as Administration, Leadership, or Education and teaching, might be covered in a single course in the curriculum. It is unclear, however, how many of the other competencies are addressed in our schools: Where might Spiritual disciplines (including practices and virtues), Active listening, Interpersonal competency (including openness to other or social skills), Finance (including accounting and planning), or Intercultural competency (including aptitude, knowledge, or skills) be found in the seminary curriculum (in either the academic or student life realms)? Are they being addressed? Even if the seminary curriculum includes one course in leadership and administration, is it adequate, given the finding that Administration, Leadership, and Finance were 3 of the top 12 competencies that alums reported relying on most heavily?

These findings raise certain questions for individual schools: Does the list make sense for your context? Do the competencies align with what your school expects your graduates will need? Are they in accord with expectations of associated ecclesial bodies? Does the list mirror the needs of your graduates? Have you researched what your graduates need?

And for theological education in general: Overarching questions for theological education, more generally, include: should all of these competencies be addressed in theological education? If not, what partners might share the responsibility? How does a school fit into a broader ecology of partners committed to the vocational preparation of students? And how does this role in the ecology help the school determine which competencies it should address?

Do alums from different types of schools rely on different competencies?

Some “core” competencies are called for regardless of a school’s ecclesial family. We looked at the top 10 competencies, ranked according to the percent of alums from schools of each ecclesial family who named a competency. We found that alums from evangelical Protestant (EV), from mainline Protestant (ML), and from Roman Catholic/Orthodox (RCO) schools share 8 of the top 10 competencies: (in alphabetical order) Active listening, Administration, Bible, Education and teaching, Pastoral care and counseling, Preaching, Spiritual disciplines, and Theology. Given the vast differences in ways ATS schools provide theological education (often differentiated by the school’s ecclesial family), and the various particularities represented among the schools, it is remarkable to see there is a common thread that characterizes the needs of alums, perhaps suggesting a set of core competencies required by graduates of theological schools.

That said, it is also important to note the differences, based on ecclesial family of the school. Table 2 shows the top 10 competencies, by percent of alums from schools of each ecclesial family. Alums from ML schools clearly rely on the competencies of Preaching (52%) and Administration (50%), while alums from RCO schools rely more heavily on Theology (49%), Spiritual disciplines (41%), and Active listening (40%). The top competencies for alums from EV schools are more diffuse, with no competencies clearly rising to the top: Administration (44%), Preaching (44%), and Pastoral care and counseling (42%), etc.

Evangelical Protestant (EV) (n=484)		Mainline Protestant (ML) (n=296)		Roman Catholic/Orthodox (RCO) (n=160)	
Administration	44%	Preaching	52%	Theology	49%
Preaching	44%	Administration	50%	Spiritual disciplines	41%

Pastoral care*	42%	Pastoral care*	40%	Active listening	40%
Leadership	39%	Active listening	39%	Preaching	34%
Theology	35%	Bible	34%	Administration	33%
Spiritual disciplines	35%	Theology	33%	Pastoral care*	29%
Education*	34%	Leadership	30%	Bible	24%
Bible	32%	Spiritual disciplines	30%	Interpersonal*	23%
Active listening	30%	Education*	26%	Formation	23%
Formation	24%	Finance	23%	Education*	21%
...		

Looking down the list to the full top-20 ranking (not shown here), some unique requirements surface. Liturgics and worship, for example, made it to the top 20 for alums from ML and RCO schools, but not for alums from EV schools; Church history was in the top 20 list for alums from EV and RCO schools, but not for alums from ML schools; and Intercultural competency was among the top 20 for alums from EV and ML schools, but not for alums from RCO schools. Finally, competencies that were named among the top 20 for only one ecclesial family help to characterize each family's particularity: Evangelism and mission for EV schools, Networking and community organizing for ML schools, and Ministry experience for RCO schools.⁶

Do alums in different jobs rely on different competencies?

Alums rely on different competencies based on their job contexts. In congregational settings, for example, almost 8 out of 10 alums said they rely most heavily on the competency of Preaching. Contrast this with those who work in healthcare, where almost 7 out of 10 named Active listening as the competency they most heavily rely on (Table 3).

Congregation (n=420)		Healthcare (n=64)	
Preaching	77%	Active listening	67%
Administration	59%	Pastoral care and counseling	66%
Pastoral care and counseling	55%	Difficult conversations	50%
Leadership	47%	Spiritual disciplines	48%
Bible	41%	Interpersonal competency	30%
Theology	39%	Theology	31%
Spiritual disciplines	35%	Intrapersonal competency	30%
Education and teaching	33%	Intercultural competency	25%
Active listening	31%	Formation	23%
Finance	25%	Other	20%
...		...	

* Some competencies have been abridged in this chart: Pastoral care and counseling, Education and teaching, Interpersonal competency.

⁶ For top 20 lists for schools in each ecclesial family, contact the author (gin@ats.edu).

Active listening was also named most frequently (nearly 6 out of 10) by alums working in community service, while Theology and Education and teaching made the top of a more diffuse list of those working in educational job contexts. (See Table 4.)

While the top competencies are clearly identified in certain job settings (e.g., 77% of all alums working in congregations naming Preaching), for those in other job settings, needed competencies are spread among many (e.g., 44% of all alums working in education naming *both* Theology and Education and teaching). The fact that none of the competencies for this latter group reached the 50% mark most likely reflects the diversity of vocational roles occupied by ATS alums working in educational settings. Indeed, nearly equal numbers of alums in this job context said they were administrators or teachers.

Community service (n=41)		Education (n=200)	
Active listening	59%	Theology	44%
Administration	49%	Education and teaching	44%
Communication skills	41%	Active listening	32%
Pastoral care and counseling	39%	Spiritual disciplines	28%
Spiritual disciplines	29%	Administration	28%
Finance	29%	Communication skills	27%
Conflict resolution	29%	Bible	26%
Intercultural competency	29%	Research skills	24%
Interpersonal competency	27%	Pastoral care and counseling	21%
Leadership	22%	Interpersonal competency	19%
...		...	

Some competencies emerge as distinctly useful in a single vocational setting. Difficult conversations, Intrapersonal competency (i.e., related to self-awareness, self-agency, setting boundaries, being centered), and Formation (i.e., related to personal or spiritual development) were found among the top 10 only for alums working in healthcare. Conflict resolution surfaced in the top 10 only for alums working in community service, and Research skills, only for alums working in education. Preaching came up in the top 10 only for those in congregations (although Communication skills, among the top 10 for those in community service and education, may function as the non-congregational parallel to Preaching).

These results make sense given the various vocational contexts of alums. We expect that those working in congregations would name preaching as a needed competency, for example. What this brief analysis highlights, however, is that the lists are different. The temptation for some schools is to attend to all the competencies both because they want to prepare all their students and because they—schools and students—are unsure where students will serve when they graduate. Rather than attend to all the competencies, schools would do well to focus on the particular competencies that are associated with the career trajectories for which individual degree programs are meant to prepare students.

While the number of alums who reported work in areas such as healthcare (n=64), community service (n=41), or other non-congregational faith-related contexts (n=70, not shown here) is each not at the level of those working in congregational settings (n=420), the number of alums working in *all* the various non-congregational settings (n=445) *together* is about half the total of alums who responded to the

survey. (See [“Where are Graduates Serving?”](#) Jo Ann Deasy’s article in Colloquy for more discussion on jobs and job contexts. A given school cannot attend to all the competencies, and it behooves schools to figure out which competencies to address, which niche makes most sense for the school’s mission. Finding out where your alums are working, and with what job titles and contexts, is a great place to start.

In sum...

The Workforce Mapping survey provided important information on the competencies ATS alums most heavily rely. The competencies that were most frequently named by the whole group of alums include: Administration, Spiritual disciplines, Theology, Pastoral care and counseling, and so on.

Similarities across schools’ ecclesial families suggest a set of competencies that characterize theological education: (alphabetically) Active listening, Administration, Bible, Education and teaching, Pastoral care and counseling, Preaching, Spiritual disciplines, and Theology. However, differences based on ecclesial family exist, including unique competencies and different rank orders for schools in each ecclesial family.

Perhaps most interesting was finding how the needed competencies differed by vocational context. The highest percentage of alums working in congregational settings named Preaching, Administration, and Pastoral care and counseling as competencies they most heavily rely on. The highest percentage of alums in healthcare named Active listening, Pastoral care and counseling, and Difficult conversations. The highest percentage of alums working in education named Theology and Education and teaching.

With 46 different broadly identified competencies, schools may feel the need to address *all* of them, but doing this may not align well with a school’s mission of preparing graduates for a particular vocation or with the expectations of organizations that will employ the school’s graduates. Perhaps others in the ecology of partners committed to the vocational preparation of the school’s students are better suited to attend to particular competencies. Finding out where alums are working, with what job titles and contexts, and connecting with those who partner in preparing students for those jobs are two strategic steps to consider.

Additional articles related to this Educational Models Workforce Mapping survey are forthcoming: watch for an upcoming report on whether alums earned the “right” degree.

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