

# Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?

By DEBORAH H. C. GIN

Last year, as part of the Educational Models Workforce Mapping project, ATS conducted a first-of-its-kind study on alums from ATS schools. It surveyed 940 alums from 42 representative schools and two graduating classes (2015 and 2011), asking questions about their current jobs, what competencies they relied on, the degrees and credentials their employers required of them, and their coworkers.<sup>1</sup>



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.

The first in this series on the workforce study—“Where are Graduates Serving?”—appeared in April. This month, we look at the *competencies* needed for the jobs that alums currently hold. Survey participants were asked for up to ten responses to the question: “In your current role, what skills/knowledge/dispositions do you rely on most heavily to do your work?”<sup>2</sup> Coding and analysis revealed 46 competencies, which varied by school type and by job.

## On what competencies do alums most heavily rely?

Of the 46 competencies identified, 20 were named most frequently by the entire group of alums (Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth look at this research, its methodology and findings, see Educational Models Mapping the Workforce Survey Report.

<sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> Email the author for full list of competencies and their definitions.

The top five were Administration, Spiritual Disciplines, Theology, Pastoral Care and Counseling, and Preaching.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1: Top 20 Competencies (All Schools)

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

<sup>4</sup> Note that—as the open-ended responses were coded—some categories were counted multiple times for a given alum.

Some competencies in the list reflect just a few skills, areas of 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 curriculum followed by many schools: Theology, Bible, History, and (in some schools and/or degree 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 three of the top twelve competencies 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?

And for theological education in general: 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. In fact, alums from evangelical Protestant (EV), from mainline Protestant (ML), and from Roman Catholic/Orthodox (RCO) schools share eight of the top ten competencies: (in alphabetical order) Active listening, Administration, Bible, Education and Teaching, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Preaching, Spiritual Disciplines, and Theology.

But looking across the ecclesial families of the ATS member schools, some differences emerge (Table 2).

Table 2: Top 10 Competencies and % of Alums Naming a Competency, by School Type

	Evangelical Protestant (EV) (n=484)	Mainline Protestant (ML) (n=296)	Roman Catholic/Orthodox (RCO) (n=160)
Administration	44%	Preaching	52%
Preaching	44%	Administration	50%
Pastoral care*	42%	Pastoral care*	40%
Leadership	39%	Active listening	39%
Theology	35%	Bible	34%
Spiritual disciplines	35%	Theology	33%
Education*	34%	Leadership	30%
Bible	32%	Spiritual disciplines	30%
Active listening	30%	Education*	26%
Formation	24%	Finance	23%
...	...	...	...

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

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.

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.

### ***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 eight out of ten alums said they rely most heavily on the competency of Preaching. Contrast this with those who work in healthcare, where almost seven out of ten named Active Listening (Table 3).

Active Listening was also named most frequently (nearly six out of ten) by alums working in community service, while Theology and Education and Teaching were at the top of a more diffuse list of those working in education (Table 4).

**Table 3: Top 10 Competencies and % of Alums Naming a Competency, by Vocational Context**

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%
...		...	

**Table 4: Top 10 Competencies and % of Alums Naming a Competency, by Vocational Context**

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%
...		...	

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.

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 ten only for alums working in healthcare. Conflict Resolution surfaced in the top ten only for alums working in community service, and Research Skills, only for alums working in education. Preaching came up in the top ten only for those in congregations (although Communication Skills, among the top ten for those in community service and education, may function as the non-congregational parallel to Preaching).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [Email the author](#) for top 20 lists for schools in each ecclesial family.

## ***How should schools respond?***

While the number of alums who reported work in healthcare, community service, or other non-congregational faith-related contexts are not at the level of those working in congregational settings, the number of alums working in all the various non-congregational settings together is about half the total of alums who responded to the survey.

With 46 different broadly identified competencies, schools may feel tempted 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 great places to start.

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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