

ATS Study of CEOs in Theological Schools

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Introduction

Few presidents come to the leadership of their schools with desire for prestige, power, or personal gain; rather, they view it as a calling. They have heard a deep beckoning by the Spirit of God to take up this holy work, this challenging and joyful opportunity to lead their particular schools toward a new horizon in theological education. Many have come with the requirement that they give up other things that have been life-giving over the years: parish ministry, academic pursuits, judicatory administration, nonprofit work, and corporate engagements. For most, there is both sacrifice and exhilaration in responding to the call to serve as a seminary president, dean of an embedded school, or rector in a theological consortium. These gifted individuals say yes to a search committee and subsequently the board primarily because they want to shape the future of the church, find ways to recalibrate more relevant ministry, and do the formative work preparing the next generation of leaders for a burgeoning secular context.

None of this is easy, of course, and these leaders testify to their dependence upon the providence of God, trusted colleagues, and collaborative individuals in their boards, their judicatories, and their invested congregations to do this sacred task. The Office of the President is always larger than one person, and many contribute to its function. Still, it remains a lonely enterprise, hence the deep desire for collegiality with others entrusted with guiding theological schools.

Over the last three years (2019-2021), ATS has commissioned a significant study of the various roles that lead seminaries, and the studies of CFOs and CAOs have been completed at this point, providing valuable insights. This particular study is about the role of the CEO, and many have been involved in this process: thoughtful researchers, ATS leadership, and current practitioners as CEOs. I commend the leadership of ATS for initiating these studies, for they speak to the challenges in theological education and the new demands of leadership moving into the third decade of the 21st century. The CEOs of theological schools who have been at this a while, as well as newly minted leaders, are ever learning of the complexity of their roles and the widening skill sets needed to steer well their institutions as they get accurate soundings for what they must navigate.

Key researchers have gathered the data that I will use for this narrative report. David Wang, Ph.D. and Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D. are the principal investigators, the former having conducted surveys of CEOs, CAOs, CFOs, CDOs, and Student Life Officers, and the latter having interviewed 30 current ATS CEOs between December 2020 and February 2021. Dr. Wang is Associate Professor of Psychology and Pastoral Counseling at Biola University, La Mirada, CA, as well as a licensed psychologist and pastor at the One Life City Church, a non-denominational congregation. Recently he was the principal investigator for Seminary Formation Assessment Project funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Dr. Lizardy-Hajbi is

Term Assistant Professor of Leadership and Formation and Director of Office of Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, CO. She is an ordained minister with standing in the United Church of Christ. She also served in the committee for the redevelopment of ATS Standards and Procedures. Each is eminently qualified to conduct this important research. Their inquiry shapes my explication and reflection.

I come to this research project with 16 years as a president and now serving as an interim president. I could not have sustained longevity as a CEO without the significant resources ATS has continued to offer. Presidential Leadership Intensives, Women in Leadership, DIAP conferences, among other leadership development gatherings have given orientation and substance to my work.

A very interesting factor in this study is that the survey was completed prior to COVID-19 while the interviews were conducted as the virus was still raging and schools had already moved into a different delivery system. In a sense, COVID-19 has served as a magnifying glass to examine systemic issues in planning, external relations, educational delivery, curricula, and fundraising. This reality will be reflected in how CEOs think about dimensions of change in their roles, and an excursus related to the impact of the pandemic will accompany this study.

Methods

There were two phases in this study: the survey and the interviews. Phase 1 consisted of a survey by David Wang of 127 Presidents/CEOs representative of the range of schools in ATS. Survey respondents were 18.2% female and 81.8% male. Ages ranged from 36 to 78, with the mean age being nearly 59. Participants were overwhelmingly white (81.8%) with Black/African American and Asian-descent coming in at 6.6% each. Eleven research questions guided the survey and will set the framework for this summary.

In Phase 2 Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi conducted one-hour interviews with 30 CEO's, 7 females and 23 males. Four identified as Black or African American, two identified as Hispanic or Latino(a), one identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 23 identified as White or Caucasian. The interviewer contacted 65 individuals who had earlier participated in the online survey in 2020, and a 46% response rate eventuated (which is quite good) and it proved to be constructively representative. The age range was from 37 to 71, with a median age of 56. Time in the role of CEO varied, with service ranging from 1.5 years to 14 years with the average (mean) time in the role being 5.5 years. The interview sample does reflect the lack of gender and racial parity among the leaders of theological schools.

As the interviewer documented, 5 CEOs were from Canadian schools and 25 were from US schools. Eleven were from related or embedded schools, and 19 were from stand-alone or independent schools. By ecclesial family, 14 were from Mainline schools, 12 were from Evangelical schools, 4 were from Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools, and 7 were independent. The representative schools ranged from small to very large, some offering doctoral degrees (24) and some offering master's degrees only (6).

Format of Report

I will organize the report according to the research questions that framed the survey and shaped the interviews. While many of the questions had attendant areas of concern, I have summarized them for the sake of focus and brevity. I have attached the research questions and the interview questions in an appendix.

Nature of the Work and Key Relationships

The work is varied, and it is relentless. One day a president will need to lead chapel, another day work with the CFO on budgetary matters, another day meet with prospective students, another day engage board leadership for planning, another day confer with ecclesial leaders, and another day teach a class. Actually, this all might happen on the same day. Suffice it to say, CEOs must be generalists.

Meetings are the coin of the realm, and CEOs find themselves juggling many competing demands as they manage their “slammed” schedules. It is hard to find time for sabbath as the calendar fills very quickly, and weekends require times of productivity for leaders of theological schools as they preach, teach, write, and visit constituents. Both the survey and the interviews revealed the intense level of stress many CEOs feel as they seek to keep the mission and vision alive, making it operational day by day. This requires creating a culture of excellence, theological sensibility, and holy possibility.

The administrative tasks are significant, and while most CEOs have colleagues to help shape budget, planning, personnel issues, and student recruitment and success, ultimately, they are accountable to the governing body for how these matters are handled. Communicating clearly and regularly with one’s board is essential for consequential leadership. In small non-embedded schools, CEOs may carry multiple roles, only some of which may be in their wheelhouse of experience. For those schools who have university relationships, the CEOs (Deans) of the schools of theology/divinity schools spend significant time advocating for their distinctive mission within the larger institution. While these schools receive many benefits from participating in the many services of a university, the price is a lack of autonomy in planning processes and fund development.

Fundraising and donor relations are key responsibilities for CEOs, and the seasoned leader knows that this cannot be outsourced. In responding to the first research question, “How has the role changed?” the survey revealed that CEOs (26.4%) believe they face more headwinds around fundraising, having a higher amount needing to be garnered. Faithful friends of a seminary want to be in touch with the president, and when they are ready to write a check, they want to engage personally with the leader. The CEO recognizes how essential these long-term relationships are for the good of the school and gives them sufficient time.

Donors and foundations grow ever more essential as the support of denominational bodies has greatly diminished over the last couple of decades. What was once a steady source of yearly revenue for theological schools is a trickle, if even that. Educational costs have been

rising and making sure that students do not bear the whole cost of their theological education has challenged denominational structures and the schools they look to for future leadership. Financial fragility stalks the great majority of ATS schools, and the shifting demographic of many denominations has direct impact on seminaries. As foundations grow more important to fund the mission, training by ATS on how to approach foundations, write to their grant specifications, and report on how funds are being stewarded by the institution would be of critical assistance.

Years ago, Barbara Wheeler commented that most seminaries are invisible on the social landscape. This apt perception speaks not only to the insularity in which some schools operate, but it also points to the lack of a strategic communication plan to internal, external, and public constituencies. Most presidents are aware that this can always be elevated, and they know that securing the future of their schools depends upon thoughtful communication that highlights the distinctive mission and promise of their discrete institutions. Representing the public face of the seminary requires training, and the task of speaking with transparency and clarity while protecting confidential personnel matters can serve the seminary's interest in its community. It also helps harness the anxiety in the system. Once again, ATS could assist in articulating best practices.

Many CEOs come to their leadership roles from the academy, the church, a non-profit, or an ecclesial judicatory. The challenge is to learn the many aspects of the theological presidency and not simply revert to their own expertise. Survey participants selected all sectors in which they'd worked previously; 76% said congregational ministry and 24%, denominational leadership. It is not surprising that former pastors or those who come from a denominational leadership role may spend more of their finite time preaching than those who come out of an educational background. While some CEOs who come directly out of faculty maintain a teaching role as faculty, it remains a critical issue of discernment to examine how much time to devote to the classroom. While knowing the students can strengthen advocacy for the institution, teaching can also consume time that might better be spent with external concerns. Liturgical and ceremonial responsibilities are important as heads of theological schools give spiritual leadership to their communities and are expected to show up at denominational gatherings if they retain such affiliation.

The priority given to these varied areas of responsibility will most likely shift over the course of the CEO's role in their school. Knowing when to pivot is key; indeed, the future of one's school depends upon such agility.

Changes in the CEO Role

Most presidents/deans find their work more complex than that of their predecessors. Some of this no doubt is due to the pace of change, but it also reflects the shifting culture in which theological education is occurring. The tension between tending the school's internal matters and crafting its public face is the ongoing challenge for most CEOs; it was a regular theme in these interviews.

The interviews harvested a welter of responses from CEOs reflecting on how they perceive changes in their roles given the climate in higher education, shrinking judicatories, and the search for institutional sustainability. Most have felt both the inward and outward tug in their tenure as institutional heads, depending upon the urgency of internal restructuring or the need to give predominant attention to external funding sources as the quest for a sustainable business model looms for a majority of the schools. Attending to governance issues requires a critical dialectic between the two.

Said one female president of a large denominationally-related institution,

I'm trying to move us from an organization that looks inward to the kind of focus on a certain style of the academic world and making sure that that style is generated and continues, to a more outward style that will be—and is becoming—more responsive to changes in higher education. My job is far more entrepreneurial than my predecessor's job was.

As the cultural dislocation of the church continues apace, entrepreneurial thinking toward innovation is a necessary accompaniment for institutional planning, yet for many CEOs it is a new way of approaching their role. The traditional revenue streams are drying up, and new sources of income from sharing space, selling property, or new educational initiatives become new wells from which to draw. Theological schools are designing programs that will accommodate the need for bi-professional ministers, which many judicatory leaders advise. At my former school, we launched a degree in clinical counseling because reliable employment is in the offing for graduates of such a program, and this profession could easily be yoked with a part-time pastorate or non-profit leadership.

Nuances to role shifts may differ if one leads a free-standing or an embedded school. Those who serve schools in a larger university context often spend a great deal of their time running the gantlet of the bureaucratic structures that constrain the autonomy of the theological school, feeling as if they are middle managers rather than leaders who can really shape outcomes. As more schools move toward embedded identity, the role of the CEO/Dean will change further.

CEOs observed in the survey the need for more assistance in negotiating the changes in their role. This table illustrates the complexity of being an embedded institution.

Table 1: If you are in an embedded institution, does the relationship with that institution mostly help/hinder your work?

	CFOs	CDOs	CAOs	CEOs
Helps a great deal	21.4%	43.3%	34.0%	48.1%
Helps somewhat	52.9%	23.3%	34.0%	30.7%
Neither helps nor hinders	18.6%	26.7%	4.0%	5.8%
Hinders somewhat	2.9%	6.7%	22.0%	13.5%
Hinders a great deal	4.3%	0%	6.0%	1.9%

All those interviewed reflected on the challenge of leading change in their institutions. While they can imagine the kind of culture they want to cultivate, they know that it is never imposed but modeled and inspired over time. When a new face of leadership comes to a school, perhaps the first woman or person of color, the culture begins to shift and how the CEO functions may not reflect earlier traditions of the school. Nimble adaptation within the school can stimulate fresh thinking and a more inclusive sense of identity.

The external focus includes the labor-intensive work of fundraising, discovering new collaborative opportunities, and discerning which denominational and community stakeholders (such as other institutions of higher learning) can be invested in the vocation of the school. Leaders know that too much internal focus precludes listening to those voices that can constructively challenge institutional direction.

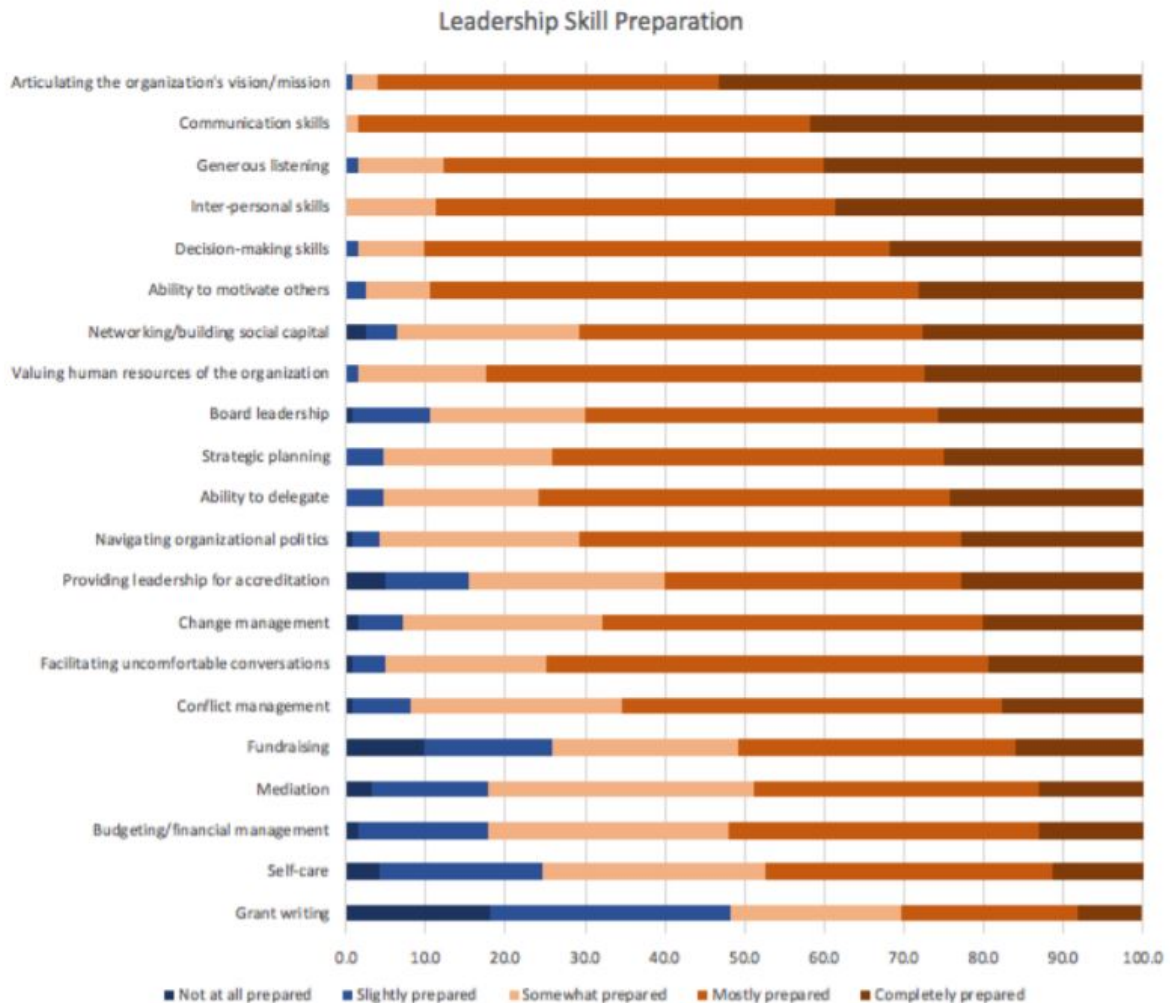
Yet, the revitalization of a school requires careful internal focus on strategic planning, administrative processes, community life, curricular review and innovation, and development of current employees for future leadership. In my experience, it is difficult to find the balance between external and internal concentration, and it will recalibrate as different issues arise. Discernment of what should be the priority is part of the work of leadership.

Preparation for the CEO Role

The interviews reported that “A majority of CEOs said that they are adequately equipped to carry out the multiple duties of their role in terms of administration, fundraising, strategic planning, creating a sustainable business model, and managing personnel conflicts.”

This contrasts a bit with the earlier Phase 1 study which highlighted preparation gaps in grant writing, budgeting, strategic planning, change management, mediation skills, fundraising, and self-care. The table below from the survey offers a comprehensive view of where CEOs feel more prepared and less prepared for their roles, which imply opportunities for training.

Table 2: ATS Training Implications



Those who came to their leadership role from other than theological education found the theological presidency to be daunting, especially if they had no experience in academic circles, according to the interviews. A corporate background does not equip leaders for the idiosyncrasies of the faculty role in shared governance; often CEOs disdain faculty approaches that seem to ignore sustainability of the institution. The old joke for faculty meetings is thus: “Everything had been said, but not everyone had said it.” The sacramentals of tenure, sabbatical, and methodical curricular deliberation, things which faculty greatly prize, may seem like luxuries to CEOs whose training is toward business success. Wise CEOs know, however, that honoring the faculty matters and even if they retain the confidence of their board and lose that of their faculty, their leadership will founder.

Those who came from an academic background in theological schools made the transition to CEO easier as they understood the unique ethos of theological; skills from parish ministry or denominational work proved helpful for the many relational demands of managing personnel and board matters. Other professional experience in the financial sector, public education, law, clinical psychology, and, yes, politics, equipped CEOs with unique skill sets. The data suggest that those who entered the CEO role from outside theological education led schools

with better financial outlooks. Did they go to such schools because of these prospects or did their presence catalyze a better primary reserve ratio? It is not clear what the relationship is in this regard.

Questions about denominational identity remain challenging, and few felt prepared to deal with the adaptive change needed to face imploding denominational structures. Americans' membership in congregations continues to decline, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999. This decline fuels the discussion of how theological schools will manage the growing secularization of the US and Canada.

Chief Executive Officers expressed the significance of ATS training, specifically the ATS Presidents' Intensives and other workshops. Not only was the orientation to the role helpful, but many spoke of the significance of the personal connections they were able to forge at these gatherings. Peer groups such as the Evangelical Presidents' group, denomination groups, and collegial relationships with leaders of nearby theological schools were also sustaining to these leaders. In my first years as a president, I regularly met with two other presidents of neighboring schools who had served longer than I. It was profoundly formative for me.

Many named In Trust as a source of training, finding the curated wisdom very helpful. Of course, consuming resources like this assumes that one is relentless about learning. Interviewees spoke about their quest for learning about leadership through reading, coaches, board members, and their own cabinets, which draws together persons of different expertise. They realize that they cannot be specialists in every area, so depending on others and "borrowing brilliance" equips them for a successful trajectory.

Stress/Stressors of the CEO Role

Not surprising, stress among CEOs is endemic. Consequently, interviewees mentioned health concerns such as high blood sugar, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and weight gain. Some expressed reservations as to whether they could "get out of their jobs alive," a key objective as David Tiede once observed as one's presidency winds down. How these leaders managed their stress varied greatly, as you might imagine, yet all were aware that the complexity of their work and its pace exacted a toll, prompting two out of three CEOs (according to the interviews) to think about leaving their roles. Stated one leader of a large denominationally-related seminary during the interview: "If a president doesn't think about leaving at least once a week, you're probably not doing anything."

Phase 1 of the study offered a more nuanced assessment of predictors for persons actively looking for other jobs or thinking of doing so. None of the areas of satisfaction/dissatisfaction assessed—work, salary, professional development, relationships with coworkers, work team, supervisors, and faculty—were significant predictors of CEOs actively looking for another job. Nor were the stresses related to finding a sustainable business model, dealing with change and innovation, balancing demanding work hours and other responsibilities, enrollment challenges, and legal issues significant predictors.

The interviews were more revealing about the impact of varied stressors such as finances, personnel conflicts, loneliness, hard decisions, competing demands, and accumulated grievances. Interestingly, the longer a CEO serves, the more criticism accrues from the faculty. Yet, CEOs continue to serve as they have larger institutional stewardship and vision to sustain. They know that the nature of the position makes them ultimately responsible for their institution's well-being.

Those who approach retirement look carefully at the optimal time to depart from their school. They imagine what they can realistically accomplish in their summative years, desiring to leave their school in peak condition (if at all possible) for their successors. They know it is easy for a new president to gainsay the decisions of one's predecessor (as they may have done initially) and the CEO desires to avoid leaving things in disarray. Ultimately, one needs to steward the power of the office for the good of the institution as they prepare to conclude their presidency.

Stress Management

Managing stress effectively has significant bearing on longevity and satisfaction in the role of CEO. Because these leaders are persons of faith, spiritual practices such as prayer, study, meditation, journaling, spiritual direction, church involvement, and caring for the body through exercise assisted them in finding greater balance. Relational tending through time with spouse and family, friends, members of their faith community, peer support, and coaches/mentors proved essential. The interview researcher noted that one president even mentioned sex (with his spouse) as a way of managing stress. (Perhaps this one was a scholar of the Hebrew Scripture and sought to follow its guidance).

Mentoring and coaching improves the approach of the CEOs in stress management. The survey indicated the importance of having mentors as 83% noted their influence on their professional development. Women (100%) credited the importance of those who have advocated for their leadership as compared to 87% of the men. Through self-reflection prompted by these relationships, leaders were able to build capacity for the varied demands of their roles. Feeling accompanied by these trusted mentors diminished the isolation of their work. Board chairs sometimes bear the mantle of mentoring a new president as they may have institutional memory, governance knowledge, and leadership skills which the new leader does not yet possess. In my early years as a president, I was fortunate to have as board chair a seasoned CEO from the corporate sector. The five years he served as chair helped me engage some of the most critical issues my school was facing such as re-locating the campus and refining the educational model.

Collegial connections with peers are essential for successful leaders. Interviewees named the ATS Women in Leadership Program, ATS Presidents' gatherings, and the Evangelical President's group as key opportunities to build networks of friendship and support. One leader commented, "When I'm able to actually go to an event say a presidents' event or something like that, I always come back renewed because I recognize I'm not alone." Additional affinity groups such as the Latino/a or African American CEOs have greatly enhanced as sense of solidarity in leadership as these persons may be the first person of color in a historically white theological

school. I could well imagine that a LGBTQ group might emerge in the future, although the research does not suggest this.

Informal connections also have granted insight and support. I know of a group of six women (they call themselves the WiTS—Women in Theological Schools) who have met together twice a year for over a decade, rotating among their schools. It is a way to ensure they always “had their WiTS about them.” In addition, they would carve out time during a biennial or other ATS professional meetings to get together. Even as some of the presidents in the group have begun to retire, they continue to gather, albeit on zoom during the pandemic. As one member of the group stated, “we are doing more than professional development; we are building life.” Such a holistic view empowered creative leadership in their discrete institutions. Deep listening and probing questions helped frame creative problem-solving for what seemed to be intractable challenges.

Interestingly, the interviews did not reveal much about the role of humor in managing stress. While there were some “gallows humor” asides, direct reflection on this charism as enabling one to engage stressors was absent. Humor is like grace; it keeps one from taking oneself too seriously and remembers that it does not all depend upon one’s relentless productivity. Graceful empowerment comes from beyond oneself, as Christians confess.

Longevity, Satisfaction, and Effectiveness

Presidents/CEOs named the shaping and sustaining of the mission of their schools as the chief determinant of longevity and satisfaction. The percentage of CEOs satisfied or very satisfied with their current job is at the high level of 91%. When they witness the outcomes of their hard work (stressful though it be), they find congruence in their vocation. A president of a very large seminary detailed,

[It’s] the missional alignment between what I care about and what the institution cares about. I don’t feel like I’m constantly having to convince people about things. I feel like there’s alignment between what I want to give my time to and what the institution wants to give its time to, though not always.

Great satisfaction comes when leaders can witness how the graduates of their schools are making their way successfully in ministry. Leaders also revel in being a part of the formation of students, helping prepare for the churches a new generation of pastors. A president of a Canadian Evangelical school summarized the articulations of many CEOs:

One of the most rewarding things is being involved in the lives of these students. People who are still kind of wrestling with the question of the nature of God’s claim on their lives as they try to navigate their way through trying to be faithful to cycles of Jesus Christ in the context of the challenges that they face. Many of them are very inspiring. Many of them need advice and mentoring, and it’s just a privilege to be involved in that. Not only because there’s a personal sort of sense of satisfaction in being involved intimately in the lives of students like this, but also for the welfare of the church. It gives

one hope and encouragement for the church when you see some of these really gifted and dedicated people spending their lives in the service of the church.

Along with being personally invested in the mission of their schools, CEOs, as mentioned earlier in the report, come to these positions out of the spiritual experience of being called. One president said of her coming to a large independent Mainline seminary:

I feel that I have not really accepted a position as much as I've accepted a call. I feel like being a president and certainly being president of [my school] is something that you're called to. I was minding my own business, living my best life in my ministry, and felt this calling, this tugging. It feels God-initiated and God-informed and I'm not alone in doing this work.

CEOs most commonly indicated in the survey that the three stressors that lead to dissatisfaction (and shortened longevity) are solving enrollment challenges, finding a sustainable business model, and dealing with difficult employees and colleagues. Of course, one can stay longer in the CEO role if there is a sense that one's gifts can well serve the ongoing work for the discrete mission of the school and particularities of the office. When there is little alignment, stress grows, and faculty, staff, and board sense that the "fit" is not right.

Often this perception leads to transitions in the CEO office; the tremor that ensues in a school is not easily managed. The research gives clear evidence that leaders relish challenges and are not deterred by pivoting to new frontiers, especially if their institutions are not inured to experimentation and risk. Freedom to try new things is especially energizing for those in leadership, particularly as it summons their creativity and courage. Anxiety and resistance usually accompany this, which also calls for creative energy to not be demoralized by it.

Several job stressors did significantly predict CEOs actively looking for other jobs, including dealing with difficult employees and colleagues, hiring and retaining effective employees, and dealing with difficult board members. Work-related burnout also was predictive of active search for other work.

When the CEO is excited by the flourishing of the school's mission, this is an accelerant for donor involvement. Enthusiasm is contagious, and donors want to be involved in something larger than themselves. A compelling mission attracts students as well as faithful friends who will give.

Factors of CEO effectiveness are regularly tied to financial stability or improvement, and effective leadership requires several characteristics. The interviewer made the following observation:

In reviewing factors of CEO effectiveness related to institutional characteristics of effectiveness, comments around a leader's ability to guide/navigate change and have courage, reflexivity, creativity and flexibility were named more frequently by leaders in schools with primary reserve ratios that were improving or stable. This points to the potential for these particular CEO characteristics to positively impact an institution's

financial viability, though further research is needed in order to make this claim definitively.

Importance of Collegial Relationships

While CEOs value independence, they prize even more supportive and trusted collegial relationships. They know that the role of leadership of a theological school is too encompassing not to rely on a leadership team that brings varied skill sets. I know this reality only too well. While I had some significant success in fundraising in my 16 years as a president, I have relied heavily on the Treasurer of the seminary to craft the budget and monitor its deployment. While I can imagine what I desire that our graduates receive in terms of academic, personal, professional, and spiritual formation, I have leaned heavily on the expertise of the academic dean to implement a shared vision for student success. A close ally must be the leader of the advancement/development department as the CEO must give significant attention to cultivating key sources of fund development from major donors, and the advancement team (or officer) keeps the CEO informed of strategic contacts. Working toward aligning the executive team is a chief priority for the CEO as trust and support can make all the difference when the prevailing winds are threatening. This climate allows each member of the team to challenge the assumptions that their colleagues bring. Debate and open discussion strengthen collaborative decisions, and when the team comes to an agreement about steps to pursue, there is evidence of a more careful vetting process. The CEO is responsible for cultivating this kind of trust and openness with other executive leaders. Understanding one another's work styles, temperament, and skills can help refine effective functioning.

The partnership between the CEO and CFO is critical. As the Phase 1 study showed, there is a challenge in getting them together for training events or even ongoing strategic conversations to ensure resources are used to fulfill the school's mission. Only 51% CFOs as compared to 84% of CEOs believe that these crucial conversations are transpiring. In my experience, one cannot fail to listen carefully to CFO analysis and attending professional meetings with the CFO or CAO or CDO can strengthen teamwork.

The CEO/President's relationship with faculty is also key. Presidents who come out of the faculty do know the academic culture; however, some do not realize that once they have moved into the CEO office, former faculty colleagues regard them differently. The shift in power dynamics sometimes catches the CEO off guard, and they must recalibrate what were once more egalitarian relationships. To repeat an earlier emphasis: honoring faculty, listening to faculty, and respecting the role of faculty in shared governance are wise and essential practices for the CEO.

The role of the board as the body who is the steward of the mission of a school has significant impact for the success of the CEO. Not only does the board supervise and evaluate the leader, but it has also continuing fiduciary responsibility to support the one it has called to lead the school. Wise boards are intentional about the process of calling a new leader and then paying attention to the dynamics of transition into the office. Too many search committees working on behalf of the larger board think their work is done once a new CEO is named. They breathe a sigh of relief, and the new leader is left without ongoing accompaniment in beginning this new professional chapter.

The survey showed that many CEOs desire more supervision than they are receiving. Boards can be somewhat lax in regular performance evaluations; it is usually left to the leaders to initiate this process. One president insisted that the bylaws be altered to include the regularity of review by the board. Presidents/CEOs need the feedback of their boards, especially affirmation of the gains being made and gentle redirection when they are not hitting the marks.

Too often boards do not know the best practices for evaluating their CEO, and they are reluctant to not get it just right. The Phase 2 interviewer reported, however, that a “majority of those interviewed said that they were satisfied with the level of supervision they receive from their boards or university leadership.” Presidents are grateful when the board does not micromanage but are incredibly engaged. Some have quipped that the best posture for the board is “nose in but hands off.”

Gender and Race

Gender plays a role in the work of the CEO, and more research could illumine the varied dynamics further. As the contingent of women who lead schools grows, we are seeing greater influence in denominational life and strategies for leadership that may be more sustainable. Yet, gender continues to hold women back. As one female CEO observed, “Gender has a big role to play in terms of what persistence or courage or grit look like. Women are penalized for those attributes. Men can get away with a lot more abrasive behavior.” Further assessment of this emerging reality will strengthen an analysis of the role of leadership in theological schools.

Race continues to be a key factor as more persons of color occupy the CEO position. Often the first to hold the president/dean role in their schools, they must engage boards with clarity as they realize that a white culture is firmly in place. Diversity on board may be aspirational more than reality; however, CEOs are determined to configure a more representative racial/ethnic faculty, board, and donor base. As the diversity grows in their institutions, the power dynamics shift. The results of the interviews did not explicitly state that there is a different accountability for white counterparts, but it is an undercurrent as women and persons of color reflect on what they bring to their institutions.

Humility, Integrity, and Spirituality

Personal characteristics such as humility, integrity, and spirituality featured prominently in the effectiveness of leadership. The ancient monastics call humility the “master virtue,” and other virtues surely flow out from it. Humility requires accurate self-assessment, dependence upon others, sharing credit, taking responsibility when things go awry, and the willingness to continue learning. In a well-known analysis, Jim Collins speaks of level 5 leadership, “an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will.”¹ The ambition of the leader is not for personal aggrandizement, but for the institution. This kind of leadership not only works in the business sector, but it also aligns well with theological schools, especially

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 21.

as presidents understand humility as being *imitatio Christi*, and ambition is in the service of mission.

Integrity demonstrates a wholeness, specifically a congruence between what one says and what one does. While never fully without shadow, a life that demonstrates integrity inspires others and builds trust. The power of clear communication depends upon such integrity, and persons want to follow such a leader. Whether in financial, moral, legal, or collaborative ventures with ministry partners, the leader of the theological school can erode confidence in the school's mission if he or she does not embody and champion it.

The spirituality of the leader comes through in preaching, teaching, writing, and liturgical events in the life of the theological school. It is often said that a spiritual leader can take persons no further than what the leader has traversed. Continuous deepening of one's grounding in spiritual practices widens the heart to lead in authentic ways. Wise leaders find times of retreat, spiritual direction, as well as regular worship essential for their thriving in the role.

Humility, integrity, and spirituality: each of these empowers relationality which is critical for effectiveness in the role of CEO. A leader cannot work in isolation, and the capacity for empowering the success of colleagues moves the whole institution towards missional flourishing. It also keeps the leader in the posture of sharing credit, essential to *esprit de corps*.

Other skills and attributes that arose in the interviews were curiosity, experience, "an understanding and appreciation of assessment," and the ability to "assimilate vast amounts of data and understand what those data mean." Leaders also mentioned "embodied agency" and the skill to make good decisions. This points to wholeness within personhood. Once again, leaders make the differentiation between management and leadership. As one CEO put it,

A manager is given solely the parameters in which to work and the goals to be accomplished, and they make it happen. The character of leadership is that often you're working with multiple constituencies, unclear questions, and sometimes unclear or competing goals. It's a matter of weighing out costs and benefits and investments and relationship and making calls based on conflicting priorities.

Specific skills can ensure longevity and satisfaction in leadership roles. The survey demonstrated preparation for leadership effectiveness that CEOs bring to their roles. The top four are: articulating the vision and mission, communication skills, generous listening, and interpersonal skills. Developing vision/strategy, summoning courage, guiding change, cultivating relationships, and communicating carefully came into view through the interviews. While some CEOs have more experience utilizing these skills in former roles than others do, the good news is that they can be learned and honed through coaching and constructive peer relationships.

Those interviewed named other areas of effectiveness, e.g., enhancing supervisory skills, attending to operational efficiencies, creating new partnerships, experimenting with new business models, and developing non-degree educational programs that appeal to specific populations or

meet particular needs. Surmounting the challenges that schools of theology face will inevitably prompt leaders to stretch toward new competencies to sustain their institutions.

One of the rich aspects of the interviews was the transparency of CEOs. One confessed:

Here’s the truth. Anybody in my position—they might tell you or speak publicly with a kind of confidence—but I know in our phone calls, everybody’s like, “I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know how to move this forward . . .

The challenge is to lead with confidence while also experiencing the qualms of not knowing fully. One must find a safe place to voice such unknowing while still providing hope to one’s institution. The future of theological schools is uncertain, and CEOs are improvising as best they can through faith and ingenuity.

ATS Support

The Association of Theological Schools commissioned this study, in part, because of its need to refresh its understanding of what leadership development is desired by the present generation of CEOs. As the interviewer summarized, “the interview protocol included several questions about the kinds of support, resources, professional development opportunities, and content that CEOs would find most beneficial for their work.”

Programming

At one point, I heard Dan Aleshire, former Executive Director of ATS, speak of the “power of convening” that ATS could offer. The sample of presidents in Phase 2 of the study echoed this perception as they noted the significance of gathering, even if content was a secondary concern. The great majority of CEOs appreciate the offerings of ATS and have found the programming, support, and resources a helpful orientation to the work. Peer connection remains the singular source of support. As one dean shared, “The times for building that camaraderie with the fellow presidents, those are the more lively, engaging, life-giving experiences.”

Table 3: Do you see ATS programming as an important source of professional development?

	CFOs	CDOs	CAOs	CEOs
Yes	78.4%	57.3%	82.5%	78.0%
No	21.6%	42.7%	17.5%	22.0%

Responses did not differ significantly across personal or institutional variables (e.g., ecclesial family, size).

Affinity groups of CEOs have proven helpful, as the presidents/deans find others in similar circumstances, especially with race and gender concerns. Finding colleagues with whom to share the leadership journey is clearly a vital part of sustaining one in the vocation. Mentoring in these groups is valued, and several suggested finding ways to develop this further, while acknowledging that much good work is transpiring already. Pairing experienced CEOs with new CEOs in a formal relationship of mentoring could be a helpful new initiative, and several advocated for this possibility.

Exchanging information about what is working at the discrete schools is a source of inspiration for other CEOs. Especially for those who find themselves a minority in a historically white theological school, the promise of companionship and mentoring makes a difference for their satisfaction and longevity.

The survey revealed that CEOs will be more likely to participate in ATS programming if there was a cohort (44%) and presenters from similar schools (40%), and if the meetings were shorter (36%) and featured experts from outside theological education (31%). This suggests that these kind of professional development opportunities need to be focused on the current role of the CEO and offer networking opportunities as well as content.

Preparation: Content Areas

If one came to the CEO role from within a theological school, the learning curve about varied processes is less steep. Albeit, serving as a professor may not equip one to understand governance challenges, finances and budgeting, strategic communications, conflict resolution, legal issues, and the ever-important work of fundraising.

Those who come from other professions such as congregational leadership find the expectations of the role formidable. As one former pastor put it, “There was just so much I didn’t know that I didn’t know.” Hence the content provided at ATS workshops was invaluable. Some found that their learning from ATS had immediate relevance to their situations, and they began implementing necessary change for the good of their schools. I recall the impact of my own first presidential intensives; reading the ATS handbook for presidents² was a good thing but meeting seasoned leaders and hearing their presentations had an exponential effect for my own school. Others suggested that hearing from those outside the orbit of theological education would foster a larger conversation about currents in which seminaries swim.

Survey participants noted that programming and resources focusing on developing sustainable business models, strategic planning, fundraising, and change management would be most attractive to them. Other desired programming includes budgeting, grant writing, networking, board leadership, and articulating the organization’s vision and mission, as well as other competencies.

² G. Douglass Lewis and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., eds., *A Handbook for Seminary Presidents* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Embedded schools have their own challenges, and leaders who serve these schools request further content on their unique needs. In my judgment, this request will continue to be before ATS as the number of embedded schools will rise in the next few years as theological schools collaborate with other institutions of higher learning for sustainability. Regularly we hear of new institutional partnerships and more are successful than a decade before.

While some suggested that content for board members might be helpful, they also acknowledged the good work of In Trust. When this important resource collaborates with ATS, as it so often does, good things ensue. Its focus on governance is the primary source for board development.

Resources

Many of those interviewed named ATS staff by name for their “support, helpfulness, and responsiveness in answering questions, providing guidance on issues and challenges, and taking time to explain data and financial reports.” Over a third reported that they had contacted ATS when needs arise at the schools, and others said they would not hesitate to tap the resources of ATS in the future. A little hesitancy was voiced by a CEO of a Canadian school: “There is a sense that if you talk to someone at ATS about struggles or challenges you’re having, that maybe it’ll come back and bite you because now they know your dirty secrets.” Another leader of a school in Canada extended this observation: “There’s something just a little bit complicated about the person having a particular kind of authority around accreditation, as well as being the kind of person you’d turn to for assistance. That’s something that I always pay attention to when I’m going to go to [my liaison] with a question.” While this may reflect a sense of US hegemony in ATS circles (or of the occasionally fraught relationship between Canada and the US), they point to the tangled relationship between support and accountability. Perhaps a clearer understanding of the role of the ATS liaison to one’s school could allay some of this fear.

ATS has been judicious in programming that intentionally includes concerns of Canadian schools, and the commissions are representative of US and Canada leadership. This is significant as there are different structures for relationships with provincial oversight.

Clearly CEOs desire retreats away with other CEOs where the agenda is not too packed, webinars about urgent matters, gathering with other executive leaders, and leaders from other fields. A desire to learn from others is evident from both survey and interviews.

Of special assistance is the attention to interpreting financial data and clear statistical reporting. As the interviewer noted, “One president quipped, ‘Their best help for us is giving us good data’.” The tools that ATS has instituted for measuring what constitutes a healthy school are especially helpful as the metrics are clear and accurate, informing CEOs what is the real status of their schools financially.

Other resources of help are ATS Engage, the online networking program, and *Colloquy* (the e-newsletter), in the reflection of these CEOs. Some suggested that providing consultants, webinars, or other onboarding material and relationship would be helpful to them. One remarked, “It would be great if during the first week, I heard from ATS with a welcome, maybe if there was

a one-hour introduction from anybody. It could be from a staff member that says, ‘Now that you’re president, this is what ATS is. This is what ATS does. This is how ATS could be helpful to you.’” More personal onboarding is a practice I would recommend in light of the responses in the interviews.

Excursus: Impacts of COVID-19

All of the interviews took place during the pandemic and, wisely, the protocol of the interviews included questions about the impact of this global event upon their role, their school, and specifically their institutional planning.

CEO Impacts

Many articulated a sense of relief about not being on the road. Whereas some travelled as much as 100 days a year (some even more), they prized finding new ways to connect. While the essential tasks of fundraising, communications, administration, community relations, strategic planning and visioning, and teaching (for some) have continued, how they have conducted this work has shifted to video conferencing, phone, email, and even the venerable practicing of writing personal notes. This reboot of forms of communication have contributed to a more intentional engagement. While they are eager to return to earlier modes of connection, they are discerning how they might balance their work rhythms in a more sustainable manner. Travel takes a toll, and the respite that the pandemic has provided prompts new discernment about what travel is really necessary to do their work.

The pandemic has required nimble leadership as CEOs have led their schools in urgent planning so that they might pivot quickly as this crisis continued. Attending to CDC, state, and local guidelines about preventative measures against the coronavirus has shaped planning about student housing, chapel services, online instruction, board meetings, even virtual commencement services. These many concerns have preoccupied CEO bandwidth over the past 15 or so months. The particular needs of international students have also been a consideration as often they have been a part of the residential community of the school.

One example of the impact on a CEO was offered by one female leader:

It put a lot a pressure on me and the senior administrative team in terms of the decisions we were having to make and the rate at which we were having to make them—deciding to go virtual in a very short period of time, making decisions around graduation, postponing graduation, starting the school year off fully online.

Institutional Impacts

The pandemic has had both positive and negative impacts on their institutions, according to the CEOs. If their schools were already online in their educational delivery, the impact was much less. Most who already had some sort of hybrid educational model in place fared well, but those with a primarily residential model faced more challenge. Some suggested that their

institutions required more technological infrastructure to sustain the new educational model of primarily online delivery.

Interestingly, institutional giving did not fall precipitously as many feared, and CEOs report that there was stability in their annual funds. Add to that a reduction in expenses, the additional assistance from the government in the form of Payroll Protection Program, and robust enrollment from new students eager to receive online education, the financial profile of many schools was strengthened. Those who lead embedded schools, however, noted that the effect of the pandemic upon their universities reported to the interviewer that this would lead to “potential furloughing of staff and cutting off salaries due to residential student revenue losses.”

The impact on faculty and staff is palpable, with the predominant feeling being overwhelmed. As they try to manage their own kids’ education—with the burden falling upon women--while keeping up with course management, administrative duties, and the regular family responsibilities, it has been a demanding schedule, and most are exhausted by the competing demands of this epoch.

ATS might consider a webinar series on re-entry practices. The pandemic has shifted so many things, and CEOs are eager to ensure safety and excellence as schools re-open. They are also asking will the shifts we made during COVID last?

Future Impacts

The Phase 2 interviewer reported that the pandemic has shifted the horizon of institutional planning. Rather than executing the measured three-to-five year cycle, many CEOs realize that COVID-19 has upended what was previously in place. Now they are rethinking building and facilities use, a flexible workforce, institutional culture, and the mode of supervision. As one leader put it, “Strategic planning long-term especially has been so changed by COVID. “We’re basically making decisions; and about a month later, we are making a new decision or revising that decision.”

A friend who walked the *Camino de Santiago* told me of a particular morning on her pilgrimage it was so foggy that although she could hear cow bells, she could not see them. It became for her a metaphor for the presidency of her seminary: take the next step even if you cannot fully see where you are going. It is good advice for this season.

Theological schools have demonstrated resilience in this time of pandemic. Their CEOs have honed collaborative skills as their planning has required all facets of their institutions to move toward greater alignment to foster their mission.

Conclusion

The richness of the data from the survey and the interviews has been hard to capture in this brief narrative as the schools and the CEOs are located in varied ways. Several themes emerged that are of immense significance for effective leadership: relational work, careful

communication, navigating change, spiritual practices, and visioning/strategic planning. These are essential skills to helm a school in these turbulent times.

While the stressors are many, the satisfaction that the great majority feel in this calling is sustaining when the way is hard. Weathering the challenges of this complex work is assisted by ATS resources, peer connections, and mentoring opportunities. Engaging these opportunities will be necessary for longevity as a CEO in a theological school.

Leading a theological school is a sacred calling, and one's sense that the One who beckoned the CEO to this task will accompany in one's tenure can sustain the leader when walking in the fog of unknowing. Leaders trust that the Spirit of God intercedes when all they can do is sigh. They learn that the Risen Christ gives hope that schools also participate in the paschal mystery of dying and rising, becoming new in the process. Faithful colleagues, as co-participants in the Body of Christ, are significant means of discernment, and without them, CEOs cannot continue their work.

Appendix A

Research Questions and Interview Protocol

Eleven research questions focused the survey.

- Research question #1: How has the role changed?
- Research question #2: What are the pathways to the role?
- Research question #2.2: For presidents/deans, what recruitment retention models are most effective?
- Research question #3: What is the nature of the work? How is it distributed?
- Research question #4: What is the relationship of the role to other roles in the institution?
- Research question #5: What predicts longevity in the role?
- Research question #6: What predicts satisfaction in the role?
- Research question #7: What is the degree of institutional support and empowerment?
- Research question #8: What predicts effectiveness in the role?
- Research question #9: How adequate is the compensation?
- Research question #10: Where are the preparation gaps and what are the implications for ATS training?
- Research question #11: How is the effectiveness of your work assessed and who assesses it?

Fifteen areas of inquiry framed the interviews.

1. What is the nature of the role and work?
2. How has the role changed in recent years, and what has this required of your leadership? What gains and losses have accrued because of these changes?
3. How have the challenges of the global pandemic impacted your work, culture of your school, engagement with stakeholders, planning, and virtual communication?
4. Will these necessary changes that ensued have enduring impact?
5. What is the level of satisfaction in your role, where do you feel gaps in your preparation, and how can ATS help you feel better equipped to manage the urgent issues of creating a sustainable business model, increasing fundraising, strategic planning, managing personnel conflicts, and overall administrative responsibilities?
6. What are the most rewarding aspects of serving as a CEO in a theological school?
7. Have you considered leaving your role, and for what reasons?
8. What is the nature of the supervision you receive and is it satisfactory?
9. How do you relate to other senior leaders in your institution and what role does trust play in building a successful leadership team?
10. Can you describe how governance functions, including other constituents such as judicatories and donors?
11. What strategies do you pursue to ensure missional clarity and sustainability?
12. How are you developing leaders in your school as you pursue succession planning?
13. What does effective leadership look like in your role?
14. What optimal professional development could ATS provide to assist you?
15. Are there other specific ways ATS can provide resources, tools, and programming to strengthen you in leadership?

Appendix B Interview Participants and Sample Representation

ID Number	Gender	Race	Relatedness	Ecclesial Family	Denominationality	Country	Size
2	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	CANADA	Small
3	Male	White, Caucasian	Related	Mainline	Denominational	CANADA	Mid
7	Female	White, Caucasian	Related	Mainline	Denominational	CANADA	Large
8	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Large
9	Male	White, Caucasian	Related	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	USA	Small
11	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	USA	Largest
12	Male	Asian or Pacific Islander	Related	Evangelical	Independent	USA	Large
16	Female	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Largest
19	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	USA	Mid
21	Male	Black, African American	Related	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Large
24	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Independent	USA	Large
26	Female	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Large
29	Male	Hispanic, Latino(a)	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Largest
31	Female	Black, African American	Related	Mainline	Independent	USA	Large
32	Female	Black, African American	Stand Alone	Mainline	Independent	USA	Large
33	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Small
34	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Large
37	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Largest
38	Female	White, Caucasian	Related	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Largest
42	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	USA	Mid
45	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Small
47	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Independent	USA	Largest
48	Male	White, Caucasian	Related	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	Roman Catholic / Orthodox	USA	Large
54	Male	Black, African American	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Mid
55	Male	Hispanic, Latino(a)	Related	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Largest
57	Male	White, Caucasian	Related	Evangelical	Independent	CANADA	Largest
59	Female	White, Caucasian	Related	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Small
60	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Independent	USA	Mid
63	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Mainline	Denominational	USA	Mid
64	Male	White, Caucasian	Stand Alone	Evangelical	Denominational	CANADA	Large

Response Set	ATS/COA Database
17% Canada	13% Canada
40% EV	46% EV
47% ML	38% ML
13% RC/O	17% RC/O
36% Related	32% Related
17% Small	15% Small
20% Mid-sized	28% Mid-sized
37% Large	31% Large
26% Largest	26% Largest
64% Denominational	60% Denominational
23% Independent	23% Independent
13% Roman Catholic / Orthodox	17% Roman Catholic / Orthodox
7% Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity	7% Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity
17% Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity	18% Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity
20% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Larger	19% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Larger
37% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Smaller	24% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Smaller
3% Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	18% Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs
17% Master's Colleges & Universities: Smaller Programs	15% Master's Colleges & Universities: Smaller Programs
23% Female	36% Female
77% Male	64% Male
3% Asian or Pacific Islander	3% Asian or Pacific Islander
13% Black, African American	5% Black, African American
0% Native American, First Nation	0% Native American, First Nation
7% Hispanic Latino(a)	2% Hispanic, Latino(a)
77% White, Caucasian	90% White, Caucasian

Appendix C Survey Sample Representation

Total Sample Size: 127 (47% response rate)

Response Set	ATS/COA Database
18.9% Canada	15% Canada
43.5% EV 37.9% ML 17.7% RC/O 0.9% Jewish	44% EV 33% ML 22% RC/O 1% Jewish
35.4% Related	41% Related
22.5% Small (1-75 HC) 33.1% Mid-sized (76-150 HC) 23.4% Large (151-300 HC) 21.0% Largest (300+ HC)	22% Small 29% Mid-sized 27% Large 21% Largest
58.5% Denominational 22.8% Independent 17.8% Roman Catholic / Orthodox 0.9% Jewish	54% Denominational 23% Independent 22% Roman Catholic / Orthodox 1% Jewish
4.1% Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity 13.7% Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity 23.4% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Larger 28.2% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Smaller 13.7% Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs 16.9% Master's Colleges & Universities: Smaller Programs	5% Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity 15% Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity 20% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Larger 25% Doctoral Universities: Professional-Smaller 17% Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs 18% Master's Colleges & Universities: Smaller Programs
18.2% Female 81.8% Male	12% Female 88% Male
6.6% Asian or Pacific Islander 6.6% Black, African American 0% Native American, First Nation 2.5% Hispanic, Latino(a) 81.8% White, Caucasian 2.5% Other	6% Asian or Pacific Islander 6% Black, African American 1% Native American, First Nation 2% Hispanic, Latino(a) 85% White, Caucasian