

Beyond congregations: new study reveals the value of theological education for diverse contexts

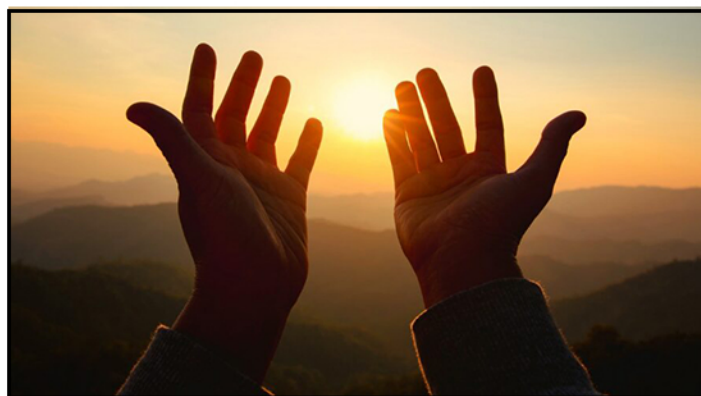
BY CHRISTOPHER M. THE

What is the significance of a theological education for vocational contexts and roles beyond the congregation? Ten expert interviews across chaplaincy, education, entrepreneurial, and nonprofit sectors paint a portrait of what theological education gets right—and what it might do next.

A seminary graduate becomes a winemaker, bringing prophetic disruption to the industry as a historically marginalized person. A chaplain serves communities of unhoused persons through disasters and displacement. A nonprofit leader draws on theological training to organize their communities around shared values in a fractured public square. A religion teacher in a Catholic school brings their theology degrees to bear on a role that will never involve the altar.

None of these graduates followed the historical vocational pathway that theological education was initially designed to produce. Yet all of them, according to a new ATS-funded study, are drawing on competencies that their theological education cultivated—whether they or their supporting communities fully recognized it at the time.

These are among the stories surfaced in a peer-reviewed, open-access study recently published in the *Review of Religious Research* that explored the question, “What is the significance of a theological education for vocational contexts and roles beyond the congregation?” ATS research consultant, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, conducted 10 in-depth interviews with experts working in or alongside non-congregational settings. Their voices offer affirmation and challenge for ATS member schools seeking to better understand student motivations and vocational trajectories today.



Where are ATS graduates serving?

Half of all theological school alums work outside congregations and denominations, according to the 2022 ATS Mapping the Workforce Study. Pushing past this statistic, the 2025 non-congregational study asks what those vocational lives look like on the ground, and the resulting sketch is broader than some might think.

Unsurprisingly, chaplaincy was named by nearly every interviewee, and not only in its familiar settings of hospitals, prisons, and the military. Study respondents described emerging chaplaincy contexts like disaster response, online platforms, and social justice movements. One educator observed that even as religious affiliation weakens in wider society, the same needs met by faith communities continue to persist in full—and chaplains are increasingly the professionals stepping into that space.

Yet, the workforce landscape extends well beyond chaplaincy. Interviewees described graduates involved in community organizing, philanthropy, advocacy, media, law, and technology. In addition, educational roles span K–12 religious instruction, higher education faculty positions, as well as alternative forms of community learning. Social entrepreneurship drew particular attention as a sector attracting younger adults who want to live out deeply held values without anchoring themselves to institutional

structures. Threading through all the possibilities is the growing prospect of multi-vocationality. One study participant recalled informing students that they would need to “hustle” after graduation—a message, this individual noted, that no one in seminary had ever given them before. The latest data from the ATS Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) confirm the pattern: more than one third of new students in fall 2025 plan to hold multiple positions after finishing their programs, while half of all respondents are unsure whether to expect individual or multiple work positions later ([2025-26 ESQ Total School Profile \[10/31/2025\], Table 21](#)).

What is the share of your alums serving outside of congregations, and does your school's public identity reflect that reality through its admissions messaging, course offerings, and catalog language? Several interviewees urged theological schools to reckon with a gap between what theological schools actually produce—graduates equipped for a remarkably wide range of settings—and how those institutions describe themselves to prospective students and the wider public. “What can you promise people that they will experience in seminary?” asked one participant. “Be clear about that, and communicate that well. Make that promise to people and deliver on it.” Another interviewee urged ATS member schools to question the assumption of simply growing their enrollments: “And are you willing to help graduates find work in areas that you are maybe uncomfortable or unfamiliar with?”

For schools whose founding mission is tied to preparing congregational leaders in a specific confessional tradition, broadening the institutional narrative is no small challenge. Frankly, it can feel like mission drift. Several interviewees acknowledged this tension directly—yet they argued that the operative question is not whether to abandon tradition, but how to live out that tradition's missional promise in a changing world. How do ATS schools remain true to their roots, as one participant put it, while offering something wider than denomination-specific preparation? One educator suggested that programs oriented toward broader spiritual care may prove more effective at preparing people for the realities of professional practice than those designed primarily around ordination or formalized ministerial preparation in a particular confessional context.

Assets hiding in plain sight

Given that the vocational landscape for theological education is wider than previously thought, the 2025 non-congregational study's second finding may be even more consequential: theological education already cultivates a set of competencies that experts across multiple sectors recognize as distinctive and necessary, even beyond congregational contexts.

Every interviewee affirmed the formational capacity of a sound theological education—that is, the ability to form persons religiously and spiritually in ways that other professional degrees simply do not attempt. One study participant described this phenomenon as human formation for the whole of life, not merely preparation for a set role. Others emphasized its contemplative depth for developing the maturity to attend to subtle dynamics, for instance, in caregiving encounters, in organizational life, or in one's own interior world. These are not incidental byproducts of textbooks and coursework but represent, according to interviewees, a core formational asset that theological schools offer and that very few other institutions can replicate.

Likewise, religious literacy surfaced as highly valued, most notably in its breadth of application. Interviewees described related competencies with growing demand across sectors. For example, they named the ability to understand how religious commitments operate in the world, help communities make meaning of significant experiences they cannot easily name, and work with ritual and sacred space in beyond explicitly religious settings. A chaplaincy educator in Canada raised a cautionary note: as clinical training programs increasingly emphasize counseling technique over religious and spiritual grounding, what is most distinctive about the theologically trained professional risks being lost.

Critical thinking, interpretation, and the ability to navigate differences rounded out the portrait. One nonprofit leader described theological education as the place where people learn to think beyond the models they have been given—to question, reimagine, and lead from a deeper foundation. Another interviewee observed that exegetical skills cultivated through sacred texts can be redirected

toward reading the many rooms of public life—the plurality of environments, communities, and organizational cultures comprising our social reality. Many study participants named the elusive skill of holding difference without resolving it, of seeing pluralism as an opportunity rather than a problem.

Cultivating a threshold for holy tension is one of theological education's most transferable gifts so urgently needed in our times. If your school already cultivates such capacities, how deliberately are you naming them? Are these commitments visible in your learning outcomes, program descriptions, and external communications?

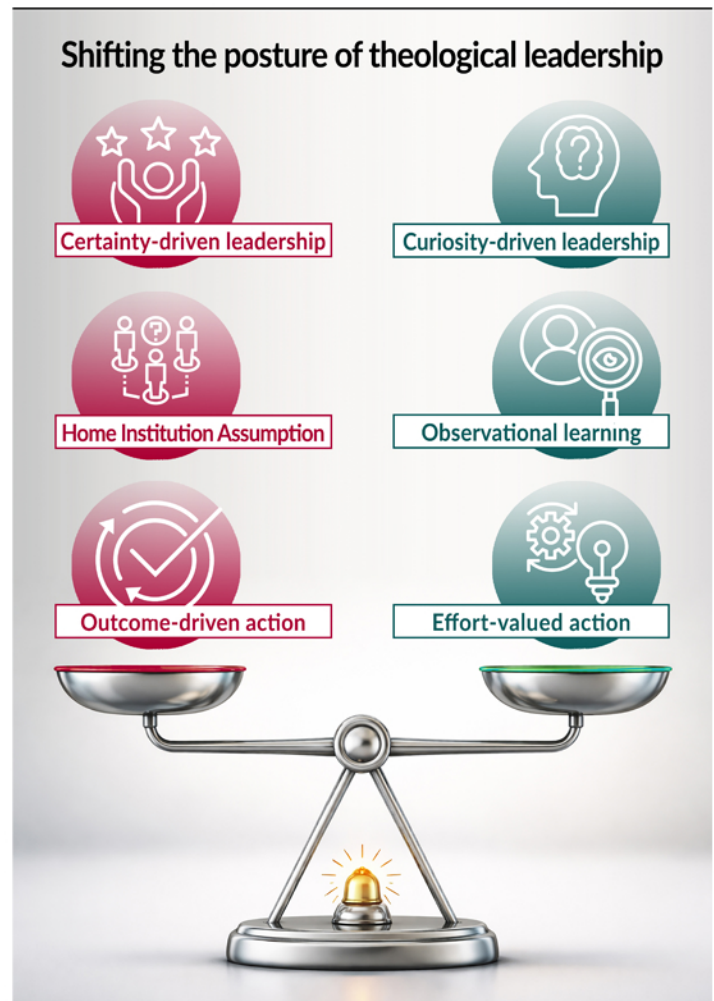
A strong foundation on which to build

Study participants also identified a cluster of competencies they believe theological education tends to underemphasize, and several observations carry practical implications for how ATS member schools think about curriculum, faculty, and institutional partnerships.

The competency of leadership was described in terms that go well beyond what most theological programs address explicitly: facilitating meetings, managing staff, navigating organizational politics, reading the business model of the organization you work for, and understanding who holds power and who needs it. One participant noted that the chaplains who advance into leadership positions are those who have learned to operate effectively amid interlocking systems, by demonstrating a kind of organizational fluency beyond what their seminary education had fostered. Another interviewee reframed the gap of leadership as a relational challenge: while the notion of trust in public life has not vanished, it appears to have migrated away from titles or credentials and toward relational influence. If that is true, then the way ATS member schools present themselves—and prepare their students—may need recalibrating to engender deep trust.

The theme of adaptation surfaced a deeper tension, as one participant observed that theological education has been quite effective at preparing people to sustain existing institutions—but less effective at equipping them to reimagine what already exists or to build something new. A respondent recommended comfort with failure as a sorely

needed disposition, noting that an overly outcome-driven approach to ministry can stifle the very imagination it claims to cultivate. Illustrating a similar point, another interviewee contrasts the traditional posture of a religious leader or missionary crossing a border to tell others how things work on the home side, with the alternative posture of a scout as someone who crosses over to observe, listen, and learn before discerning next steps.



Other skills like communication, financial literacy, and technological fluency were named as areas where ATS member school graduates often find themselves underprepared. Demonstrating communication competency encompasses the ability to tell compelling stories, to speak winsomely in spaces that are not already sympathetic, and to translate theological conviction into compelling language that moves people in diverse contexts. Skills including budgeting, fundraising, and reading a profit-and-loss statement were described as critical yet chronically absent in newly minted graduates. Moreover,

technology concerns including artificial intelligence emerged as a formidable frontier for society, with several study participants fearing that theological education on the whole may be ceding rather than engaging the issues.

Such changes in society do not require ATS member schools to abandon their commitments to scripture study, theology, or religious history. The strong foundation on which theological education is constructed invites more trust and engagement, not less. Are the competencies most in need duly reflected in how faculty lines are allocated, courses are sequenced, and educational effectiveness is demonstrated? If asked what is the return on investment for a theological education, does a winsome response likewise honor and challenge the premise of the question?

Never alone in a community of conversation

Offering pointed depth rather than systematic breadth, as Lizardy-Hajbi makes clear in her research report, the central insight of the 2025 non-congregational study is worth restating plainly: *theological education must continue to cultivate competencies that matter deeply across a wide range of vocational settings, including and beyond congregations.*

The opportunity before your institution is not necessarily to become something entirely different, but to recognize more fully what you already are and to build on that

recognition with greater intentionality throughout your programs, partnerships, planning, and processes—in other words: the whole of your institutional identity.

We invite you to share wisdom with colleagues on [Engage ATS](#). How does your school talk about the full range of vocational paths your graduates pursue? What would change if your recruitment materials spoke as clearly to the future nonprofit executive, artist, camp director, politician, or social entrepreneur as they do to future ministers? What competencies and connections are your graduates telling you they need? As you execute talent searches, are these vocational frontiers and industry edges represented in your candidate pools?

Insights from this and related studies are informing the ongoing [ATS Student Questionnaires Redevelopment Project](#), which seeks to improve the quality and relevance of student information and to enhance institutional resources for data analysis and decision-making. Reach out to ATS Student Data Services at Qmail@ats.edu to explore how your school's student data strategy can inform its institutional planning and evaluation.

Editor's Note: The full research article by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi—available now as an open access pre-print via DOI: [10.1177/0034673X261429276](https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X261429276)—will appear in a future printed issue of the [Review of Religious Research journal](#).



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