

Chaplaincy Innovation Lab identifies gaps in "supply side" of training

BY WENDY CADGE AND GRACE TIEN

Growing numbers of theological schools have chaplaincy-focused programs among their degree options, but most of these programs are developed independently of one another with little standardization in learning goals or outcomes. Enrollments in theological education grew during the pandemic, with many new students focused on careers in chaplaincy and spiritual care. This is an important time for theological educators to ask how well they are preparing students to work as chaplains and how they can best partner with clinical educators and others involved in what we call the "supply side" of chaplaincy.

The supply side of chaplaincy is defined by a complex array of institutions and organizations that have been training and hiring chaplains since the beginning of the modern profession. The term "chaplain" is also a complex descriptor for a spiritual caretaking role that has since moved beyond its historically Christian roots. While many may assume that a chaplain is a Christian clergy person, priest, minister, or pastor, chaplains actually represent a wide range of religious backgrounds or may not be affiliated with any religious group. Chaplains also differ from traditional religious leaders in that they are not limited to caring for one local religious body or one religious group, and they often operate in a diverse range of social contexts, institutions, and organizations.

In the fall of 2021, the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab (CIL) identified 107 theological schools offering a total of 122 degree programs with "chaplaincy" or "spiritual care" in the titles. Of those 122 degree programs, 75 are MDiv



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programs, 24 are MA programs, and the remainder include DMin, PhD, and other programs. The Lab identified a number of commonalities across programs, presented here in order of decreased prevalence:

- ◆ CPE or clinical training (required in 58% of all degrees)
- ◆ A course in pastoral care/counseling (57%)
- ◆ Knowledge of the language of a sacred text (56%)
- ◆ An ethics course (52%)
- ◆ A leadership course (43%)
- ◆ A world religions or religious diversity course (34%)
- ◆ An introduction to chaplaincy course (19%)
- ◆ A course in death or grief (10%)
- ◆ A course in healthcare chaplaincy (an option in 28% of degree programs)
- ◆ A course in military chaplaincy (an option in 20% of degree programs)

Theological educators emphasized three primary goals of chaplaincy programs during interviews conducted by the Lab: (1) educators want students to be able to work in multi-faith environments; (2) they aim to teach students how to think and reflect theologically and use that perspective to address suffering; (3) they want to engage students around questions of personal identity and authority.

Some faculty members emphasized chaplains' professional identities and the power they have in terms of what other people look to them to do. "Presence,"

traditionally part of the way chaplains describe their identities and authority, was also mentioned by several theological educators as part of what they are trying to teach. Educators tend to look to clinical training programs as the places where students do work around formation, practicing and reflecting on themselves through work with people in difficult situations.

How and where chaplains are trained and prepared to do the much-needed work they do is a complicated, ambiguous, and fraught space. Many chaplains go through a process of

required theological or graduate degree training, experience working in a local religious body, endorsement, clinical training or clinical pastoral education (CPE), and/or board certification. Most theological schools have Christian histories and roots despite the increasing need for training that addresses a diverse range of religious backgrounds and those with no particular religious affiliation.

Clinical programs, in contrast to many theological programs, provide more hands-on training that addresses practical considerations for spiritual care in pluralistic and non-religious settings. Federal employers like the US military branches, the federal Bureau of Prisons, and the Veterans Administration (VA) conduct their own training for incoming hired chaplains that focus more on acclimating new chaplains to their specific workplace contexts.

Chaplaincy has a long history in federal sectors like the US military branches, federal prisons, and the VA, where chaplains are required by law. More recently, chaplains have worked in other sectors like healthcare, law

enforcement, university campuses, corporate settings, and newer contexts like social movements.

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Theological educators have not come to a consensus about the

skills and competencies chaplains need to do their work, and educators are not well connected to clinical chaplaincy training or the day-to-day employment requirements of paid chaplaincy positions (see [this project page](#) for more academic sources).

CIL is committed to addressing these challenges. In addition to efforts in progress, the Lab currently provides a [series of videos](#) describing the needs of employers, as well as the [Field Guide for Aspiring Chaplains](#) to assist those in the earliest stages of considering the work of spiritual care.

CIL also published the eBook [Educating Effective Chaplains in Theological Schools](#) to help educators revise or create programs for spiritual care education. For use directly in the classroom, the Lab will soon publish a textbook with the University of North Carolina Press, [Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century](#), and offers four interactive [case studies](#) on critical chaplaincy skills. Please visit CIL's [Backpack](#) page for more resources.



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