

Nurturing the nurturers: strengthening chaplaincy for a changing world

By GREGO PEÑA-CAMPRUBÍ

Are chaplains becoming obsolete relics of a bygone religious era, or are they poised to meet the unique spiritual and emotional needs of a rapidly changing society?

The answer is clouded, not only by the public's limited understanding of what chaplains actually do, but also by the lack of standardized training they receive. As schools of theology and employers grapple with mismatched curricula and undefined competencies, chaplains are left to navigate increasingly complex roles without a clear blueprint for success.

Where do chaplains work? Four job contexts

The 2022 ATS [Alumni/Mapping the Workforce Survey](#) identified 193 respondents who were employed as chaplains at the time of data collection. Among these chaplains, 51% identified as female and 49% as male. This stands in contrast to the overall survey population, which comprised 41% female and 59% male respondents. These findings



suggest that women are disproportionately represented in chaplaincy roles relative to their representation in the broader sample.

We defined four job contexts for the entire dataset: healthcare; other nonprofit organizations; education; and congregational/denominational settings. The "healthcare" category encompasses roles in hospitals, counseling centers, hospices, nursing homes, and similar settings. "Other nonprofits" include community service organizations (both faith-based and secular), government roles, and military. The "education" category spans K-12 schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, and Bible institutes.

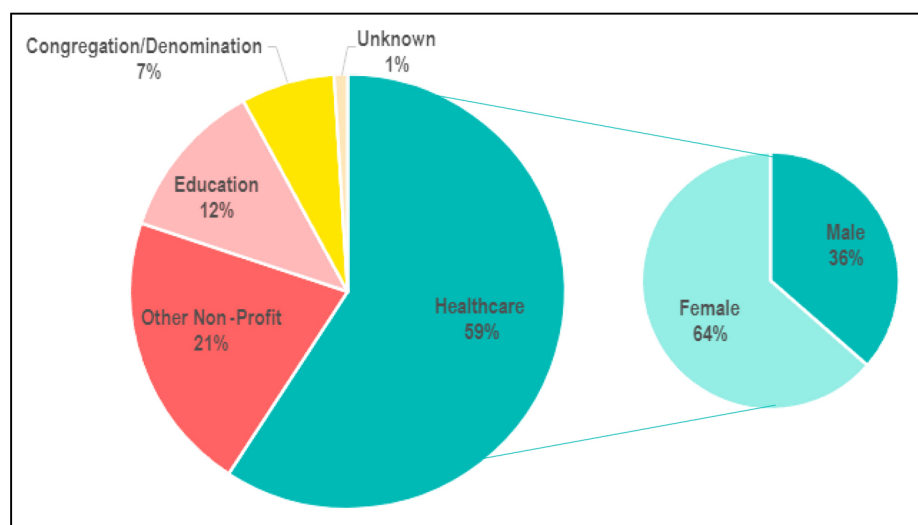


Figure 1. Pie chart illustrating the four main job contexts where chaplains work, with the "Healthcare" category further detailing the division of labor by gender.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the chaplain subset. This group is dominated by healthcare and other non-profit contexts. At 59%, a far higher proportion of alums working as chaplains are found in healthcare than of all ATS alums (11%), and a greater share work in other non-profits (21%) than all ATS alums (12%). (See Gin, Deasy, and Pena-Camprubi, "[Reimagining the role of graduate theological education in clergy formation](#)" in *Christian Higher Education*, for discussion on the full sample.)

The skills that chaplains rely on

An analysis of the sample (n= 170) showed that chaplains rely on the following competencies and dispositions to do their job:

Competencies & Dispositions	% of Chaplains
1. Pastoral Care & Counseling	73%
2. Active listening	58%
3. Spiritual Disciplines	57%
4. Interpersonal Competency	51%
5. Quality Job Performance	37%
6. Intrapersonal Competency	36%
7. Intercultural Competency	28%
8. Preaching	24%
9. Theology	24%
10. Facilitating	21%

Figure 2. Pie chart illustrating the four main job contexts where chaplains work, with the "Healthcare" category further detailing the division of labor by gender.

"Pastoral Care and Counseling" emerged as the top-ranked competency by far, with 73% of chaplains identifying it as crucial to their role. This competency encompasses different skill needs, for example, providing counseling, supporting individuals through death and dying, responding to crises, conducting virtual therapy sessions, embodying a counseling-oriented disposition, and others. The next three competencies—active listening (58%), spiritual disciplines (57%), and interpersonal competency (51%)—can be considered a cluster, as they operate in the same domain (relational-spiritual development) and are inter-dependent.

Interestingly, seven out of the top 10 competencies can be categorized as "soft competencies"—skills that do not have a traditional disciplinary area but are essential for interpersonal effectiveness and adaptability. This finding aligns with a previous *ATS Colloquy Online* article on workforce trends, which emphasized the growing importance of soft competencies across various roles (Gin, "[Mapping the Workforce of ATS Grads: Have Jobs and Needs Changed?](#)").

In addition to these core competencies, we examined the skills chaplains identified as emerging in response to evolving professional contexts, societal needs, and technological advancements. This category, labeled "New Skills," highlights how newly developed abilities complement traditional chaplaincy competencies and equip chaplains to navigate modern challenges effectively.

New Skills	% of Chaplains
1. Pastoral Care & Counseling	45%
2. Technology	24%
3. Administration	17%
4. Ministry Experience	13%
5. Communication Skills	9%

Figure 3. Top 5 New Skills for ALL chaplains (n= 115 respondents across all job contexts).

Contrary to the top core competencies, the category of "New Skills" predominantly consists of "hard competencies," which are rooted in traditional disciplinary foundations (e.g., Pastoral Care and Counseling, Technology, Administration).

It is also evident that competencies and dispositions vary depending on chaplains' job contexts. As can be seen in Figure 4, a chaplain working in a hospice requires a distinct skill set (most commonly, pastoral care and counseling and active listening, then spiritual disciplines and interpersonal competency) compared to one serving in a college or university setting (most commonly, pastoral care and counseling, then spiritual disciplines, education and teaching, and preaching).

Healthcare (n= 101)	Other Non-Profit (n= 38)	Education (n= 21)	Congreg & Denom (n= 9)
Pastoral Care & Counseling	Pastoral Care & Counseling	Pastoral Care & Counseling	Pastoral Care & Counseling
Active listening	Spiritual disciplines	Spiritual disciplines	Active listening
Spiritual disciplines	Interpersonal competency	Education and Teaching	Interpersonal competency
Interpersonal competency	Intrapersonal competency	Preaching	Preaching
Quality job performance	Preaching	Active listening	Spiritual disciplines

Figure 4. Competencies & Dispositions across job contexts.

Bridging the divide: the lack of standardization in chaplaincy education and employer expectations

Relatively little has been written about the specific competencies and skills chaplains require in their roles. However, the existing literature highlights a notable lack of consistency regarding the precise skills needed by chaplains in their professional duties. According to Cadge et al. (2020) in the *Pastoral Psychology* article “Training Chaplains and Spiritual Caregivers: The Emergence and Growth of Chaplaincy Programs in Theological Education,” there appears to be little agreement between theological institutions and chaplain employers on what chaplains need to learn while in training. In another article, “What are Chaplains Learning? Perspectives on the Supply Side: A Working Paper,” Cadge et al. in *Chaplaincy Innovation* (2022), the writers claim that

this disconnect is attributed to a lack of standardization in chaplain education and training programs. A 2023 book titled *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry* edited by Darryl Stephens, identified that often times chaplains straddle ministry and institutional work. Authors in this volume emphasize the importance of ongoing education and mentoring, as well as partnerships among seminaries, judicatories, and non-degree programs to meet the evolving educational needs of clergy. Robust partnerships among theological institutions and lifelong learning programs might ensure that chaplains are adeptly prepared to meet the theological and practical demands in their professional roles.

Now in hindsight: what chaplains wish they had learned

We also asked chaplains what they wish they had learned during their time in seminary. The following table provides the top 10 competencies and dispositions highlighted by chaplains in the study:

Wish Learned Competencies	% of Chaplains
1. Pastoral Care & Counseling	32%
2. Administration	16%
3. Theology	13%
4. Interfaith	12%
5. Evangelism and Mission	11%
6. Finance	11%
7. Leadership	9%
8. Conflict Resolution	9%
9. A Better Education Experience	8%
10. Psychology	7%

Figure 5. Top 10 Wish Learned for ALL chaplains (n= 127 respondents across all job contexts).

Notably, many of these competencies differ from those presented in Figure 2. Specifically, competencies ranked four through 10 in Figure 5 (i.e., Interfaith, Evangelism and Mission, Finance, Leadership, Conflict Resolution, A Better Education Experience, and Psychology) reflect

areas that chaplains did not emphasize as the top 10 competencies chaplains use the most in their work (Figure 2).

Interestingly, competencies such as Administration, Finance, and Leadership, while distinct, are interrelated and could be grouped together. This clustering suggests a broader category of organizational and managerial skills that are not traditionally associated with chaplaincy but are increasingly recognized as vital for success, as claimed by Kim et al (2020) in the *Pub Med* article “Management and leadership competencies among spiritual care managers.” These findings offer valuable insights for potential adjustments in theological education, emphasizing the need to prepare chaplains for diverse and complex roles.

The ATS 2022 *Alum/Mapping the Workforce Survey* explicitly asked chaplains to reflect on what they wished they had learned but were not offered in their seminary or school curriculum. However, it is worth considering that some students may have been unaware of available courses during their education or were aware but failed to recognize the potential relevance to their future careers.

A follow-up survey planned for 2027 will provide additional data on the evolving needs of chaplains in the workplace. This future survey will help clarify which competencies address specific situational needs and which ones remain consistently relevant across a wide range of professional contexts.

Need for curricula that aligns with job contexts

There is very little and inconsistent knowledge in North American society of what chaplains do and how they contribute to the spiritual and emotional lives of individuals.

Chaplains cannot be regarded as a monolithic group within the workforce, as they work in a variety of contexts, each with their respective needs.

Competencies and dispositions vary significantly depending on the job context.

“Pastoral care and counseling” has consistently emerged as the top competency across various settings.

There is an increase in the importance of "soft skills" across the board.

There is an urgent need for theological schools to re-evaluate their curricula to better prepare chaplains for the demands of their roles.

Partnerships with lifelong learning programs may provide a critical role in bridging the gap between theological education and employer expectations.

As theological schools consider how to equip graduates for meaningful and sustainable ministry, chaplaincy has emerged as an increasingly attractive alternative to congregational leadership—one that offers financial stability and diverse vocational pathways. This trend is evident not only in healthcare and military chaplaincy but also in growing areas of need, such as chaplains working along the US-Mexico border, where the number of border patrol chaplains increased 84.6% from 2020 to 2024.



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