

What do alums wish they had learned in seminary?

BY JUDITH C. P. LIN
AND DEBORAH H. C. GIN

In 2017, as part of the *Educational Models Workforce Mapping project*, ATS conducted a study on alums from member schools. One of the survey questions explored the preparation gap of alums with the question “What was not offered, but you wish you could have learned, in seminary/theological school?” (here, “Wish-Learned”). The Wish-Learned study was carried out in June 2020 as a continuation of the *Competencies study (2018)*.¹ It analyzed the top ten Wish-Learned items reported by alums based on a variety of characteristics.

Similar to the *Competencies study*, open-ended responses for this Wish-Learned question were coded into 46 categories;² however, the percentage of alums responding in a given category is far lower than that for the *Competencies* item (see below for further details). Still, the data provide important information about the relative number of alums who said they wished they had learned a given topic in their theological education.

Overall findings

It is probably not surprising that, for all respondents, categories unrelated to theology proper—“Administration” (19.7%), “Leadership” (15.3%), and “Finance” (15.1%)—



stand at the top of the Wish-Learned list. One-fifth of alums marked “Administration,” far exceeding all other categories. The next three items are theology-related, both classical and applied. They are “Theology” (12.3%), “Pastoral care and counseling” (10.5%), and “Ministry” (9.7%). These items (here, “Core 6”) recur as the top six items in different sets of analysis, though they may be in a different order.

The next five items were all marked by 6-7% of alums: “Intrapersonal competency,” “Social justice,” “Conflict resolution,” “Intercultural competency,” and “Education and teaching.”

Though not seemingly high, it is notable that about the same proportion of alums submitted responses categorized as “None” (12.8%)—meaning, no additional courses come to mind—as those who responded “Theology” (12.3%).

1 Select findings from the *Competencies study* were published by Deborah H. C. Gin, “Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?” *Colloquy Online* (September 2018): 1-4 and Jo Ann Deasy, “Where are graduates serving? New insights from the Educational Models Alums Workforce Survey,” *Colloquy Online* (April 2018): 1-4.

2 Contact Debbie Gin for the EMP Wish-Learned Code Tree.

Compared to the categories of the Competencies study, among the new categories that emerged from the Wish-Learned study were "Vocational path" (resources for career), "A better education experience," and "Contemporary culture" (engagement with). "A better education experience" was created to capture answers concerning an alum's experience as a student rather than learning content. Several alums expressed that they would have liked more support during school (e.g., counseling, academic guidance), and a few reported that they would have benefited from more choice of course delivery (e.g., more online courses to choose from, more in-person classes to choose from, more scheduling options). Still others remarked that they would have liked more communication with professors or staff.

Do alums of different vocational contexts report different Wish-Learned items?

While the Core 6 Wish-Learned items are present in all four lists except "Ministry in healthcare," they do not occupy the first six ranks on the lists, other than the "Congregation" list (see Table 1). The percentage of alums working in congregations who marked "Administration" (27%) and "Leadership" (22%) is much higher than those from other vocational contexts. For alums working in community service, the proportion of those who marked "Finance" (24%) far exceeds that of all other items.

Presumably because of the specific skills and knowledge required in different job settings, the four lists reflect the varied foci present in distinct vocational settings.

Table 1: Top 10 Items by Vocational Context

Congregation (n=420)		Healthcare (n=64)		Community Service (n=41)		Education (n=200)	
Administration	27%	Pastoral care and counseling	16%	Finance	24%	Theology	15%
Leadership	22%	Theology	13%	Leadership	17%	Education and teaching	13%
Finance	19%	Finance	13%	Social justice	15%	Administration	12%
Ministry	13%	Psychology	11%	Pastoral care and counseling	15%	Ministry	9%
Pastoral care and counseling	13%	A better education experience	9%	Administration	15%	Finance	9%
Theology	11%	World religions	9%	Theology	10%	Leadership	9%
Conflict resolution	9%	Leadership	9%	World religions	10%	Bible	8%
Intrapersonal competency	8%	Administration	8%	Liturgics and worship	7%	A better education experience	8%
Organizational politics	8%	Intercultural competency	8%	Intrapersonal competency	7%	Pastoral care and counseling	7%
Intercultural competency	6%	Social justice	8%	Vocational path	5%	Social justice	7%
(#12) Social justice	5%	Intrapersonal competency	8%	Contemporary culture	5%	Intercultural competency	7%
---		(#14) Ministry	5%	Ministry	5%	---	
---		---		Intercultural competency	5%	---	
---		---		Philosophy	5%	---	
---		---		A better education experience	5%	---	
---		---		Conflict resolution	5%	---	
---		---		Fundraising and grant writing	5%	---	
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"Organizational politics" (ranked 9th) was found among the top ten only for alums working in congregations, "Psychology" (ranked 4th), for those working in health-care; "Education and teaching" (ranked 2nd) and "Bible" (ranked 7th), for those working in education. Items that made it to the top ten only for alums working in community service included "Liturgy and worship," "Vocational path," "Contemporary culture," "Philosophy," and "Fundraising and grant writing." Likely due to the multi-faith context of healthcare and community service, "World religions" surfaced in the top ten only for these two vocational settings.

Lastly, "Social justice" ranked much higher in frequency (3rd) on the list for alums working in community service as compared to the other lists. The nature of the work in community service undoubtedly accounts for the phenomenon.³

Do alums with different earned degrees report different Wish-Learned items?

Other than for alums with a DMin degree, the Core 6 Wish-Learned items appear in the top six (see Table 2). The proportion of alums with an MDiv or a DMin degree who marked "Administration" and "Leadership" is roughly

Table 2: Top 10 Items by Degree Earned

MDiv (n=415)		MA-Academic (n=228)		MA-Prof (n=155)		DMin (n=104)	
Administration	27%	Theology	17%	Pastoral care and counseling	15%	Administration	29%
Finance	22%	Administration	11%	Administration	14%	Leadership	24%
Leadership	18%	Leadership	10%	Leadership	12%	Finance	15%
Theology	13%	Finance	9%	Ministry	11%	Ministry	12%
Pastoral care and counseling	13%	Ministry	9%	Finance	11%	Conflict resolution	10%
Ministry	10%	Pastoral care and counseling	8%	Theology	9%	Intrapersonal competency	9%
Conflict resolution	9%	Bible	7%	Education and teaching	7%	Theology	8%
Social justice	9%	Vocational path	7%	Intercultural competency	7%	Preaching	6%
Evangelism and mission	7%	A better education experience	6%	A better education experience	6%	Intercultural competency	6%
Intrapersonal competency	7%	Intrapersonal competency	6%	Vocational path	6%	Organizational politics	6%
(#11) Organizational politics	7%	Education and teaching	6%	Intrapersonal competency	6%	(#11) Pastoral care and counseling	5%
(#12) Intercultural competency	6%	Evangelism and mission	6%	(#14) Conflict resolution	5%	(#15) Social justice	4%
(#13) Bible	6%	(#13) Intercultural competency	5%	(#14) Evangelism and mission	5%	(#15) Evangelism and mission	4%
(#14) Education and teaching	6%	(#14) Organizational politics	5%	(#14) Bible	5%	(#20) Bible	3%
(#16) Vocational path	5%	(#18) Conflict resolution	4%	(#19) Organizational politics	4%	(#20) Education and teaching	3%
(#20) Preaching	4%	(#18) Social justice	4%	(#22) Social justice	3%	(#27) Vocational path	2%
---		(#22) Preaching	4%	(#22) Preaching	3%	---	
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³ This report focuses on analyzing the top 10 Wish-Learned items of different subsets. Items that fall outside of the top 10 list are only discussed and displayed when they show at least a 3% difference with items from the top 10 list.

twice as high as that of alums with an MA-Academic or an MA-Professional degree. In addition, the percentage of alums with an MDiv degree who answered "Finance" (22%) was much higher than those from the other groups. Further, a greater proportion of alums with an MDiv or an MA-Professional degree submitted responses related to "Pastoral care and counseling." Likely because of the nature of the job context, "Conflict resolution" made it to the top ten for alums with an MDiv or a DMin degree.

Uniquely, "Social justice" (ranked 7th) is among the top 10 on the MDiv alum list, whereas the same item only ranked 18th, 22nd, and 15th for alums with an MA-Academic, MA-Professional, and DMin degree, respectively. Lastly, "Intrapersonal competency" is the only item—outside of the Core 6 items—that appears in the top ten in all four lists. This suggests that the subject matter appears to have been among the topics lacking in the educational experiences of alums, regardless of degree.

Do alums of different racial and ethnic backgrounds report different Wish-Learned items?

The Core 6 Wished-Learned items are largely present on different racial lists though prioritized differently (see Table 3). What stands out is the lower rank of "Theology" (10th) and "Pastoral care and counseling" (11th) among the Black alum list, and the lower rank of "Leadership" (11th) among the Hispanic alum list. The higher percentage (18%) of Hispanic alums marking "Pastoral care and counseling," as compared to the other groups, is notable. In addition, "Psychology" (ranked 4th) only shows up on the Hispanic alum list. This seems to indicate that a special need of the population has not been addressed sufficiently. What is also noteworthy is the absence of "Social justice" and "Intercultural competency" on the top ten list of White alums, which are represented in all other racial groups.

Table 3: Top 10 Items by Race

Asian (n=102)		Black (n=69)		Hispanic (n=50)		White (n=676)	
Administration	16%	Administration	22%	Administration	22%	Administration	20%
Theology	13%	Finance	19%	Theology	20%	Leadership	16%
Leadership	12%	Leadership	17%	Pastoral care and counseling	18%	Finance	16%
Pastoral care and counseling	12%	Intercultural competency	17%	Psychology	14%	Theology	12%
Finance	12%	Ministry	10%	Education and teaching	12%	Pastoral care and counseling	10%
Intercultural competency	11%	Social justice	9%	Finance	12%	Ministry	10%
Social justice	10%	Preaching	9%	Ministry	10%	Intrapersonal competency	7%
Ministry	10%	Conflict resolution	7%	Intercultural competency	10%	Conflict resolution	6%
Evangelism and mission	10%	Vocational path	7%	Social justice	10%	Organizational politics	6%
Conflict resolution	9%	Theology	7%	A better education experience	8%	Education and teaching	6%
---		(#11) Pastoral care and counseling	6%	(#11) Leadership	6%	(#13) Social justice	5%
---		---		---		(#17) Intercultural competency	4%
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Do alums of different genders report different Wish-Learned items?

There is little variation in the proportion of the Core 6 Wish-Learned items on the male and female alums lists (see Table 4), except for a stronger focus on "Administration" (23%) marked by male alums. The last three items on the lists differ, however. It is noteworthy that "Social justice" (7th), "Vocational path" (8th), and "Organizational politics" (9th) on the female alum list only appear as the 13th, 18th, and 15th items on the male alum list, respectively. A greater need for career resources among female alums is evident.

Table 4: Top 10 Items by Gender

Female (n=344)		Male (n=566)	
Finance	17%	Administration	23%
Administration	16%	Leadership	16%
Leadership	15%	Finance	14%
Theology	12%	Theology	12%
Pastoral care and counseling	11%	Pastoral care and counseling	10%
Ministry	11%	Ministry	9%
Social justice	9%	Evangelism and mission	6%
Vocational path	8%	Intrapersonal competency	6%
Organizational politics	8%	Intercultural competency	6%
Intrapersonal competency	8%	Bible	6%
---		Education and teaching	6%
---		Conflict resolution	6%
---		(#13) Social justice	5%
---		(#15) Organizational politics	4%
---		(#18) Vocational path	4%
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Do alums from schools of different ecclesial families report different Wish-Learned items?

There is a stronger focus on "Finance" (25%) and "Administration" (24%) among alums from Mainline (ML)

schools—standing well above other items in their list—than those from Evangelical (EV) and Roman Catholic/Orthodox (RCO) schools (see Table 5 on next page). In particular, the percentage of alums from ML schools who marked "Finance" (25%) is more than twice as high as that from EV (11%) and RCO (10%) schools. Further, while "Administration," "Leadership," and "Finance" stand among the top three for the EV and ML lists, only "Administration" is among the top three on the RCO list.

Important considerations

To ensure coding consistency between the two projects, researchers on this Wish-Learned project consulted the Competencies study code tree throughout analysis. Forty-six Wish-Learned categories were subsequently identified. In the survey, the Wish-Learned question followed the Competencies question that asked, "In your current role, what skills/knowledge/dispositions do you rely on most heavily to do your work?" The two questions gathered 6,332 and 2,091 answers respectively, leading to far higher percentages of alums being associated with categories in the Competencies study. Possible reasons for the large differences are: (1) Respondents could submit up to ten answers for Competencies but only five for Wish-Learned; (2) For Wish-Learned, 120 respondents' answers were coded as "None" (12.8%); (3) Competencies focused on the respondent's daily experience, which can be readily described, whereas Wish-Learned asked for something that did not already exist in the respondent's experience. The percentages of Wish-Learned items, thus, are generally lower. Still, alums provided data that yielded good information about the relative importance of certain kinds of learning content that may be considered for curriculum redesign.

Concluding reflections

It would not be pragmatic for schools to attempt to address all Wish-Learned items that alums identified. However, to be more effective in creating appropriate curricula for their students to better prepare them for the workforce, it is incumbent upon schools to identify

carefully the job contexts and job types of their alums, and the possible corresponding preparation gaps as suggested in the alum survey discussed in this study. Concentrating on the items that appear repeatedly at the top of each list in this report may be a good place to start, even if some (e.g., "Administration," "Leadership," "Finance") are not current strengths of all ATS schools.

Table 5: Top 10 Items by Ecclesial Family

Evangelical (n=484)		Mainline (n=296)		Roman Catholic/Orthodox (n=160)	
Administration	18%	Finance	25%	Theology	17%
Leadership	15%	Administration	24%	Administration	16%
Finance	11%	Leadership	18%	Pastoral care and counseling	13%
Pastoral care and counseling	11%	Theology	13%	Ministry	11%
Theology	10%	Ministry	9%	Leadership	11%
Ministry	10%	Social justice	9%	Finance	10%
Intrapersonal competency	8%	Pastoral care and counseling	9%	Liturgics and worship	7%
Intercultural competency	7%	Conflict resolution	9%	Organizational politics	6%
Evangelism and mission	6%	Organizational politics	8%	Social justice	6%
A better education experience	6%	Education and teaching	7%	Education and teaching	6%
(#14) Social justice	5%	(#12) Intrapersonal competency	6%	(#33) Intrapersonal competency	1%
(#23) Liturgics and worship	3%	(#26) Liturgics and worship	4%	---	
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Judith C. P. Lin is a freelance research consultant who was hired by ATS to work on this research study. Deborah H. C. Gin is Director of Research and Faculty Development at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

