

Changing landscapes—insights from ATS studies on leadership

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While studies on ATS leadership education began before the pandemic, the arrival of COVID-19 has heightened the need for good information, including research on leadership. ATS is presently completing studies of six leadership groups—CEOs/presidents, CAOs/deans, CFOs, CDOs/chief development officers, student life personnel, and technology officers—to better understand the state of each role and to gather insight into current and future needs and challenges.

The studies are being conducted in two phases—an initial quantitative phase involving a census survey for each leadership group, followed by a qualitative phase involving in-depth interviews with a subset of individuals from each group. Several research questions are being investigated in this work, including:

- How has the nature of the role changed over time?
- What are the pathways taken to attain these roles?
- What responsibilities are presently associated with the role and where are the skill gaps?

While the surveys and research questions for the studies were customized for each particular leadership group, the project was designed to maximize overlap across groups in order to allow for cross-role comparisons. This article will present some key high-level findings from the surveys to the presidents, deans, chief financial officers,



and chief development officers; subsequent articles will explore each individual role in more detail.

Key shifts in the roles of leaders

The surveys asked current CEOs/presidents, CAOs/deans, CFOs, and CDOs/chief development officers to reflect on the nature and duties of their predecessor, comparing them with the nature and duties of their current positions. On average, presidents reported being in their current positions for 5.9 years, deans for 5.6 years, CFOs for 7.1 years, and CDOs for 6.2 years. In light of this, the responses reported below tend to reflect perceived changes in leadership roles over this past decade. Several themes emerged from leaders' responses to an open-ended survey question asking how they perceived their roles have changed; Table 1 on the following page presents the five most frequently raised themes for each leadership group.

Although variations exist across leadership roles, certain themes stand out as prominent. Most notably, finances and the financial well-being of the institution represents

Table 1: Top 5 Changes in Leadership Role Compared to Predecessor, by Group

	Presidents	Deans	CFOs	CDOs
#1	Greater fundraising responsibilities	Increase in assessment of institutional effectiveness	More strategic planning	Greater fundraising responsibilities
#2	More strategic planning	Increased effort managing declines in enrollment	Additional miscellaneous roles and responsibilities	Additional relational responsibility
#3	More time spent on external relations	More time spent expanding degree programs and curriculum	Additional financial role/responsibility	Greater administrative responsibility
#4	More time spent expanding degree programs and curriculum	More time spent working on ATS accreditation	Additional responsibilities re: facilities/operations	More work on staff development
#5	More time spent on financial issues, sustainability, and affordability issues	More time spent on financial issues, budgeting, cost cutting	Greater number of work hours overall	More strategic planning

a key theme that has shaped leadership roles in recent years across the board. Some leadership roles are implicated through increased responsibility to cultivate external relations and to raise funds (Presidents and CDOs), while others are implicated through greater attention to strategic planning (CFOs) and through increased efforts to create and expand programs in order to increase enrollment (Deans).

Another prominent theme from the data is that respondents from all leadership groups reported increased work hours compared to their direct predecessors. On average, presidents reported working 57 hours/week (with reports of up to 90 hours/week), deans reported 48 hours/week (up to 80 hours/week), CFOs reported 44 hours/week (up to 60 hours/week), and CDOs reported 46

hours/week (up to 70 hours/week). Many of these additional work hours were attributed to newly added roles and responsibilities related to tending to increasingly complex student issues, accreditation and assessment, technology and distance learning, business and management responsibilities, and staff development.

Trends in pathways to leadership roles

When asked about the means by which they attained their current leadership positions, only a minority of respondents across all four leadership groups reported proactively applying for their positions. In fact, most leaders arrived at their positions through invitations to take the positions or to apply. Figures 2 and 3 display the breakdown of pathways by leadership group.

Figure 2: Pathways to Leadership: CEOs/Presidents and CAOs/Deans



Figure 3: Pathways to Leadership: CDOs/Chief Development Officers and CFOs



Previous work experience also uniquely shapes the pathways individuals take to attain leadership positions in theological education. Respondents were asked about the job sector they worked in just before their current positions. Selecting from a list of ten, many reported contexts outside of graduate theological education. For CFOs, the three most frequently reported prior work sectors were Business (42%), Nonprofit (18%), and Higher Education (10%). For chief development officers, they were Nonprofit (54%), Business (45%), Congregational Ministry (34%), and Non-Theological Higher Education (30%). For deans, on the other hand, the top three were Graduate Theological Education (59%), Congregational Ministry (15%), and Undergraduate Religious Education (12%). For presidents, Graduate Theological

Education (44%), Congregational Ministry (16%), and Non-Theological Higher Education (12%) were at the top. The gender of the leader also makes a difference in vocational pathways to leadership, as suggested in Figure 4, which displays the gender breakdown of CEOs' responses to the item discussed in the previous paragraph. In addition, when asked about whether there have been persons of influence or power who strongly advocated for their leadership over the course of their career journeys, the vast majority answered in the affirmative, with women leaders consistently answering in the affirmative at higher rates compared to men (100% of female presidents vs. 87% of male presidents, 91% vs. 76% among deans, 90% vs. 78% among chief development officers, and 87% vs. 60% among CFOs).

Figure 4: Work Sector of Presidents Just Prior to Their Current Position, by Gender

	Total	Women	Men
Presidents			
Graduate theological education	44.4%	57.1%	41.9%
Congregational ministry	15.9%	19.0%	15.2%
Higher education (non-theological)	11.9%	0%	14.3%
Denominational leadership	7.1%	9.5%	6.7%
Undergraduate religious education	6.3%	4.8%	6.7%
Nonprofit sector	3.2%	4.8%	2.9%
Non-congregational ministry	2.4%	0%	2.9%
Business	2.4%	0%	2.9%
None	6.3%	4.8%	6.7%

Responsibilities and skill gaps of leaders

Survey respondents were asked to identify and describe the five primary areas of responsibility that are entailed in their leadership roles. Table 5 shows the most frequently mentioned themes for each group. As expected, the primary responsibilities of presidents and chief development officers tend to be oriented toward fundraising, external relations, and strategic planning. The responsibilities of deans, on the other hand, tend to be more internal, with their attention being focused on the oversight of faculty and students, program development, and accreditation. CFOs, similarly, reported more of an internal focus, with an emphasis on the oversight of the financial functioning and resources of their institutions. Overall, these findings coincide with earlier findings concerning change in the roles and responsibilities of leaders in theological education—with greater emphases in recent years on fundraising, financial sustainability, and assessment/accreditation.

the challenges of navigating and leading through workplace conflict. For example, grant writing, budgeting/financial management, and workplace mediation were three of the top four skills that both presidents and deans felt *least* prepared to exercise. Similarly, CFOs and CDOs also reported feeling least prepared in grant writing and workplace mediation.

Concluding reflections

Findings from the Leadership Education Studies project have highlighted changes in the roles and responsibilities of leaders in theological education. Strategic planning to maintain long-term financial sustainability is a key challenge that has shaped the work of current presidents, deans, financial officers, and development officers alike—even more so now compared to their predecessors. Leaders are now investing more time and effort outside the theological school to cultivate relationships with potential funding sources while those working within

Table 5: Responsibilities Identified as the Most Primary to Their Roles, by Group

	Presidents	Deans	CFOs	CDOs
#1	External relations (church, denoms, alums, partners, donors)	Faculty oversight and hiring	Accounting	Fundraising, major gifts
#2	Oversight of faculty, staff, administration	Program/curriculum development	Budgeting	Strategic planning
#3	Strategic planning	Academic affairs and policies	Facilities	Community and church engagement
#4	Administration	Accreditation and assessment	Administration	Administration
#5	Fundraising	Student support	Human resources	Alum relations

Given that the duties and responsibilities of leaders require an increasingly complex and expansive set of skills, it is important to understand how prepared leaders are. The survey also asked respondents to assess the degree to which they feel prepared to exercise a list of 21 leadership skills in their current roles. Again, the theme of finances was prominent in survey responses, along with

the theological school are developing and expanding programs to draw students into their campuses. Leaders are also working longer hours. Moreover, the pathways toward leadership are varied, with many working outside graduate theological education in their prior roles. These results raise important questions for all of us to consider:

- For individual leaders—where do you see yourself in these data? Are you experiencing the changes highlighted by the findings? Do you agree with the studies' findings about preparation with leadership skills?
- For schools—what do these findings indicate about how schools are adapting to changes in the landscape? Where do you see your school in this mix? How well is your school's leadership adapting to these changes?
- For the industry of theological education—what do the findings suggest about the sustainability of leadership roles, as reflected in their current configurations? Where might the industry look for its future leaders?
- Given the current global health and potential economic crises, how will responsibilities of these leaders need to shift? What will schools need from their leader as the industry adapts to heightened concerns about enrollment, donor capacity, and financial stability?

Additional articles related to the Leadership Education Studies are forthcoming; we look forward to continuing and deepening these conversations in the future.



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