

Where are graduates serving? New insights from the Educational Models Alums Workforce Survey

BY JO ANN DEASY

In 2017, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) completed a survey of 940 recent alums from member schools as part of the Educational Models and Practices Project and in partnership with the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers Initiative. The alums—graduates from 2011 and 2015—were from a representative sample of 42 schools within the Association. The purpose of the survey was to map the workforce and to study where graduates were serving, what competencies were most important in their work, and what degrees and other credentials were being required of them in the workplace. Additional data were gathered on the financial state of alums and the impact of educational debt on their lives. Several Colloquy Online articles on findings from the survey will be published during the next several months.

The 2017 Educational Models Workforce Mapping Survey was designed to better understand where ATS seminary students were serving after graduation. Data from the 2016–2017 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) showed that 41% of students were planning on serving as pastors or associate pastors of

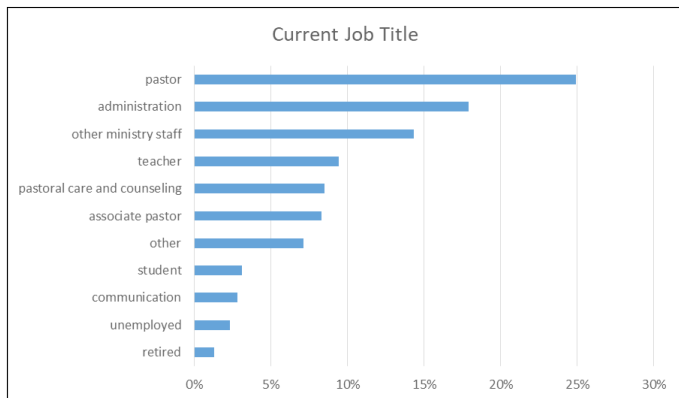


a congregation or parish. More than 10% of students reported that they were unsure of their vocational goals, whether within or outside a congregation or parish. The other 49% of graduates reported plans to serve in a wide array of ministry and non-ministry settings ranging from hospital chaplains to teachers, to nonprofit administrators, to lawyers. What was becoming increasingly clear through the GSQ was the growing diversity in the vocational goals of graduates, the changing nature of congregational ministry, and a blurring of the lines between “ministry” and “secular vocations.”

In an attempt to better understand where students are working and how they understand vocation and ministry, the 2017 Workforce Mapping Survey asked alums a series of open-ended questions about their work. Included were two questions that asked alums to write in their job titles as well as the organizations where they worked. These data provided a rich array of resources to assist in better understanding the vocational landscape.

The changing nature of congregational ministry

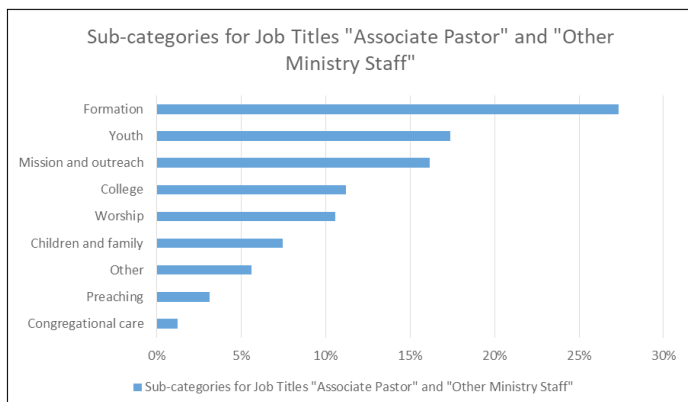
One quarter of alums provided job titles that suggested they served in lead or solo roles as pastors of a congregation: pastor, minister, vicar, curate, rector, priest, elder, priest-in-charge, lead pastor, and senior pastor. The range of titles reflects both the ecclesial diversity among ATS schools and the even broader diversity of denominations and congregations being served by ATS graduates.



Source: 2017 ATS Educational Models Workforce Mapping Survey

In addition, alums reported working in a wide range of *other* ministry roles within congregations. A little more than 8% of alums had the word “associate” or “assistant” along with pastor in their ministry titles, most of them without any other designation. Another 14% had a ministry title reflecting some type of specialization.

Ministry, like many other professions, has become increasingly specialized. Those working in specialized ministry roles reported a variety of focus areas, often incorporating formation (62% including youth) or mission/outreach. Titles ranged from the



Source: 2017 ATS Educational Models Workforce Mapping Survey

traditional—deacons, children’s pastors, faith formation directors, youth ministers, assimilation directors, and music ministers—to more unique titles such as “worship architect,” “curriculum architect,” “peace-maker,” “silence practice facilitator,” “justice coordinator,” and “generations pastor.”

While many students come to seminary with creative and unique visions for ministry, they often have to fit those visions into existing positions within congregations to find a paying job. It can be difficult for them to reconcile their calls to ministry with the ministry job market and its financial realities. The roles of associate pastor or other ministry staff represent the changing nature of congregational ministry.

The past 50 years have seen a major redefinition of clergy and lay roles in the United States and Canada. Influenced by Vatican II and a reemphasis on the priesthood of all believers in the Protestant Church, the lines between clergy and laity are not as distinct.¹

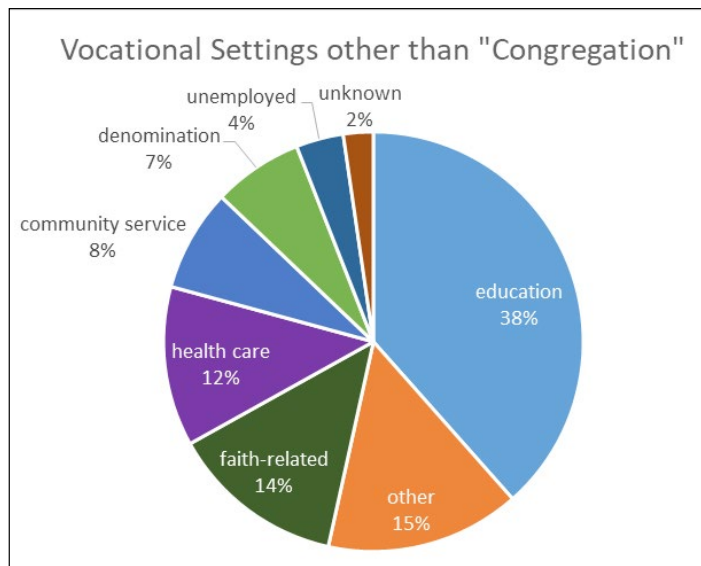
Broadening our definitions of ministry

In 2013, the ATS Student Questionnaires sought to capture the increasingly diverse career paths of students with revised questions about vocational goals. The first question asked whether or not students were planning on serving in a congregation. For those serving outside of congregations, a series of possible job categories were listed ranging from campus ministry to hospital chaplaincy to doctors, lawyers, and business professionals under the heading of “other.”

One of the goals of the 2017 Workforce Mapping Survey was to better understand the “other.” Where were these students serving? How were they defining their ministries and vocation? While 41% of students served in fairly easy-to-categorize ministry roles within congregations, the remaining 59% served in a wide array of ministry settings with very diverse responsibilities:

¹ See Jackson Carroll’s *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 14.

- Community service: non-faith related, including government, community development, prisons, and the military
- Denomination: including diocesan or denominational settings
- Education: ranging from elementary school to graduate theological education, including students
- Faith-related organizations: including nonprofit ministries, service organizations, parachurch, and missions agencies
- Health care: including hospitals, hospice, and counseling services
- Other
- Unknown



Source: 2017 ATS Educational Models Workforce Mapping Survey

The two clearest vocational settings were education and health care. Almost 40% of alums were working in education settings, primarily in the areas of teaching and administration. Among those who listed teaching as their primary area of work, almost half taught in undergraduate institutions and one-third in K-12 schools. Almost half of those serving in administration were in mid-level positions with titles such as coordinator, director, associate, or manager. A little more than one quarter were serving in senior-level administrative positions as deans, principals, and rectors.

Another 12% of alums were working in vocational settings related to health care. Approximately two-thirds serve as chaplains, the majority in hospitals but others in hospice or specialties such as palliative care or oncology. The other third were working as counselors, primarily licensed counselors, therapists, and psychologists.

The categories of "faith-related," "community service," and "other" were an attempt to categorize the myriad other jobs alums were working in during their first and fifth years after graduating. "Faith-related" described organizations that had a particular faith commitment in their names or mission statements, such as mission organizations, campus ministries, and community development organizations. More than half of the alums were serving as mid- and senior-level administrators in these organizations including presidents, executive directors, and field directors.

"Community Service" included a variety of nonprofits that were not explicitly faith-related, military chaplains, prison chaplains, and other government service organizations. For the purposes of this survey, the sample size for each area of work was too small to provide them with their own categories, but within community service are several types of jobs that might require more focused attention in future research.

Perhaps the most diverse category is that of "other." This group included presidents of for-profit organizations, IT personnel, engineers, homemakers, lawyers, accountants, and baristas. This "other" group represents 15% of those working outside of congregations and about 8% of all alums.

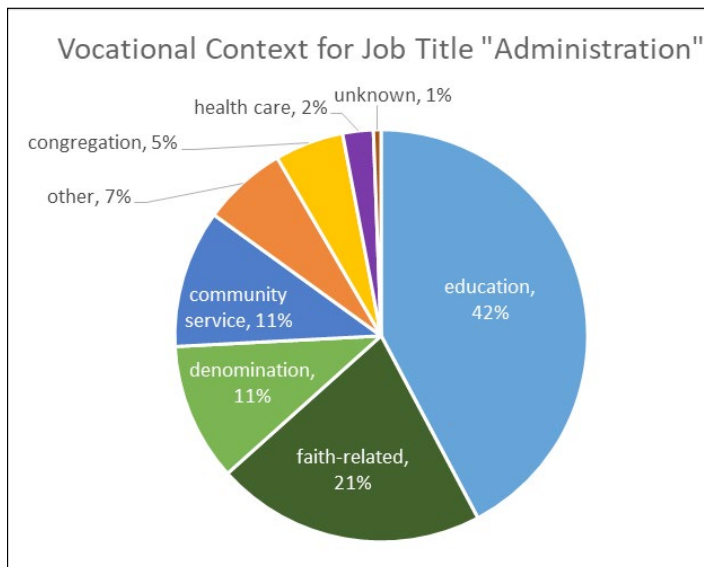
An emphasis on administration

After pastoral roles, the second most prominent job title was related to some form of administration, with a majority serving in mid- and senior-level administrative positions outside of congregations. The largest group, 42%, are administrators in educational institutions, followed by 21% in faith-related organizations.

Administration has also emerged as a competency alums rely on in their work. What does it mean for so many graduates of theological schools to be working in administrative roles? Are these students doing ministry? Or are they working outside of their vocations? Did they come to seminary for personal growth, or did they believe that theological education would enhance their administrative work and perhaps prepare them for a leadership role? If this is the case, how might theological schools better prepare students to lead in a variety of ministry, education, community service, and faith-based organizations?

Conclusion

The 2017 Workforce Mapping Survey highlighted what many ATS schools already knew. Almost half of the alums completing the survey are working in congregations and serving in some sort of pastoral ministry. The nature of that ministry, though, is changing, with many students serving as associate pastors or in some form of specialized ministry. More than half of the alums, however, report serving outside of congregations in diverse vocational settings. While many serve educational institutions, more than half serve in a wide variety of organizations ranging from hospitals and prisons to campus ministry and mission organizations to homemakers and lawyers.



Source: 2017 ATS Educational Models Workforce Mapping Survey

As ATS schools move toward a redevelopment of the standards of accreditation, they will need to wrestle with the relationship between theological education and these diverse work settings. They will need to redefine or reconfirm mission and consider the implications for curriculum and degree programs. And they will need to continue listening to their students and alums as they navigate the changing landscape of ministry in the United States and Canada.



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