

Where else can they go, and what else can they do? Guiding MDiv graduates into fields other than congregational ministry

BY PACKARD N. BROWN

From administering the sacraments to organizing donor drives, MDiv graduates are shifting their career pursuits to employment sectors other than congregational ministry. Such sectors include nonprofit administration, advocacy, chaplaincy, teaching, counseling, even the corporate world. Writing for the

[Washington Post](#), religion editor Michelle Boorstein describes how many theologians plan to carry their education and talents into vastly different employment areas.



As the director for career services at the Iliff School of Theology, I spend much time each spring with this trend, guiding and coaching nontraditional MDiv graduates in their efforts to find gainful work in other fields.

According to the latest findings from the 2015–2016 Graduating Student Questionnaire (*Table 24: Position Expected after Graduation for MDiv Students*) published by The Association of Theological Schools, roughly 35% of graduating MDiv students plan on pursuing a career direction other than religious leadership. Here, at Iliff, the percentage is almost 40%.

I do have concerns, however, about this group because it's this population of graduates who approach me every year with the questions "What else can I do? Where else can I go?" They're smart, with plenty of talent, and are extremely knowledgeable about interpersonal relations and cultural dynamics. Yet not knowing what skills are transferable or what sectors would accept them, they often lack the wherewithal and the confidence for

entering other employment venues. That's where we as student advisors and career directors can provide assistance.

Here are three "rungs on the career ladder" they need to climb in order to pursue nontraditional careers:

Determine their strengths

Before going any further, it's important to understand "strengths" mean more than just abilities. It also means those skills that bring us reward, affirmation, and fulfillment. Most of us can perform certain functions well, but we don't enjoy all of them. "I can do it if I have to" is the standard sentiment for these skills. Thus, we need to help students identify those talents that also bring them fulfillment and affirmation. Why? Research supports the [claim](#) that those who most enjoy their careers are using skills they're good at and that also bring them fulfillment.

Students may need assistance here because some honestly don't know what their strengths are.

This discernment seems simple enough, but it may involve an “unlearning” for some graduates to identify their true strengths. Perhaps they have to put aside parental admonitions for pursuing a nontraditional career. Maybe they have to erase the tapes in their heads that they can’t do anything else but what they’ve already done in a previous professional role. To pinpoint strengths, I employ a storytelling model that asks graduates to describe an achievement that was highly rewarding. As I hear the description, I pull from the story the skill subsets I recognize and then offer them up for deeper discussion and confirmation. A self-assessment instrument like [StrengthsFinder](#) might also lend some assistance.

Yet once the strengths are identified, another challenge remains: What roles use those skills? What jobs typically rely on those talents? A useful tool to use in answering these questions is the [Skills Profiler](#) provided by the US Department of Labor. It’s free and easily accessible online. It helps users match their skills with possible jobs. With the tool, users complete a skill-selection exercise, then are given a list of professional roles that use those skills. It removes a lot of the guesswork in the process.

Identify organizations that are appealing and the managers therein

Too many graduates go about their job searches the wrong way; they search solely by looking for openings online. Hours are spent visiting job sites and, like the thousands of others in the job market, browsing for openings. While this activity holds some benefit, it’s really not useful. It’s hard to stand out when there are hundreds of applicants. I tell my graduates to take a different, more effective route; for them to start instead by . . .

- Identifying those organizations that are doing something that **interests them or have a purpose and mission that appeals to them**. Do they identify with their missions? Which ones profess a purpose and commitment to values they hold dear? What organizations have a vibrancy about them, are thriving and growing?

- Within these organizations, research those departments that are organized around functions where they can contribute, where they can add value. Perhaps there might be more than one. Visit the organization’s website for internal news and memos. Read social media sites and review news releases to learn what departments are doing something worthwhile.
- Within those departments, identify the managers who oversee the activity. Through research and networking, determine as best as possible what their plans are, what needs they’re trying to address. Mine the available information to learn what problems they’re encountering and where graduates can offer solutions.

Communicate directly with these managers

Graduates must reach out to these managers directly around what programs they’re conducting and how they can contribute to those programs. More than “informational interviews,” these conversations revolve around the department’s plans and about where the graduates can add value to those goals. And there’s another benefit for contacting managers directly—[there may be a position open but not posted](#). It’s shown that up to 80 % of new openings are not posted immediately, but sit in a limbo state until someone can put together a hiring project. Nontraditional graduates have to know how to uncover these opportunities, and talking directly with a hiring director is the best way to do so.

I coach my students on the fundamentals of the “Funnel Conversation.” It allows them to discuss managers’ plans but also interject their successes. Beginning the conversation in general topics, the graduate gradually steers the discussion to plans and what hurdles get in the way of executing those plans. As the conversation narrows, they briefly introduce successes they have had in dealing with similar issues. They do this repeatedly until the conversation narrows down to where either the manager or the graduate speaks directly to where he or she can contribute to the program.

The story of Marcy T. shows how all this fits together. About to graduate, she was looking for a chaplaincy position but having little luck. Six months earlier, she'd interviewed with the local VA hospital, made it up the chain to number two, but didn't get the hire. When she approached me, she'd studied a couple of other hospitals, but the VA was still her top choice. Asked if she had recontacted them, she replied, "No, they told me just watch their website for openings." "Well," I said, "we're going to reach out to them to see what we can stir up."

We created a formal letter focusing on what she thought were the department's main priorities and how she could contribute. We also crafted phone and voicemail scripts with the same messaging and sent all the material to the director. We did this repeatedly for several weeks. On the

third pass, Marcy received a call back from the director, who invited her in for another meeting. After a lengthy interview during which she applied the funnel conversation, she was extended an offer, which she gladly accepted. Marcy couldn't believe how the select communications and persistence paid off so well.

Whether it's teaching, counseling, advocacy, nonprofit administration, or corporate human resources, the appeal of nontraditional venues for the MDiv graduate will only serve to grow and attract more students interested in taking their theological education into different fields. It is important then for student advisors, administrators, and career directors to remain diligent in equipping these graduates with the latest resources and strategies for breaking new ground for their careers.



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