

Mapping the workforce of ATS grads: have jobs and needs changed?

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

In 2022, ATS conducted the second Alum/Mapping the Workforce study of graduates from ATS schools. ATS surveyed 3,456 alums from 129 schools—three times the number of schools and almost four times the number of alums as the 2017 study. Interesting differences emerged related to their current jobs—titles, organizational contexts, degrees their employers required, and competencies on which they rely most heavily.

Note: This second survey distribution occurred in two rounds—2022 for most schools and again in 2023 to include additional schools from the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. For shorthand, we refer to this complete second distribution as 2022.

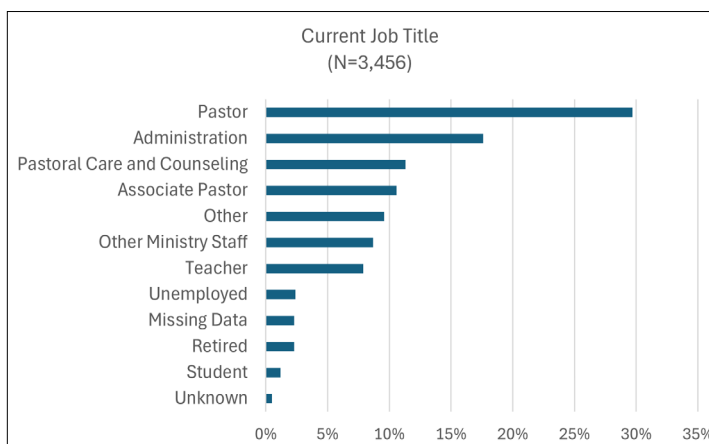
Comparisons between the 2017 and 2022 surveys uncovered key changes. The percentage of ATS alums who serve as Pastor or Pastoral counselor is up. The proportion of alums who work in congregations remains at about half, but the proportion who work in healthcare has grown. The share of alums working for employers who expected an MDiv for the job is up across all ecclesial families. The largest jumps in needed skills are with soft competencies such as Spiritual disciplines, Interpersonal competency,



and Intrapersonal competency. And nearly all of the top new skills that ATS alums had to learn are related to technology.

What kinds of jobs and industries?

The highest proportion of alums in the 2022 study—nearly 30%—reported titles coded as Pastor. This is up by 5% from the 2017 study and includes responses such as “priest in charge,” “lead pastor,” “rector,” or “rabbi.” The next highest were those in Administration roles, with about 18% of alums reporting titles such as “executive director,” “administrative manager,” and “project coordinator.” Pastoral counselors—including chaplain, counselor, and spiritual director subcategories—were the third most frequently reported jobs at over 11% and up from 8% in 2017. This increase also represents a jump in two rank positions in five years.

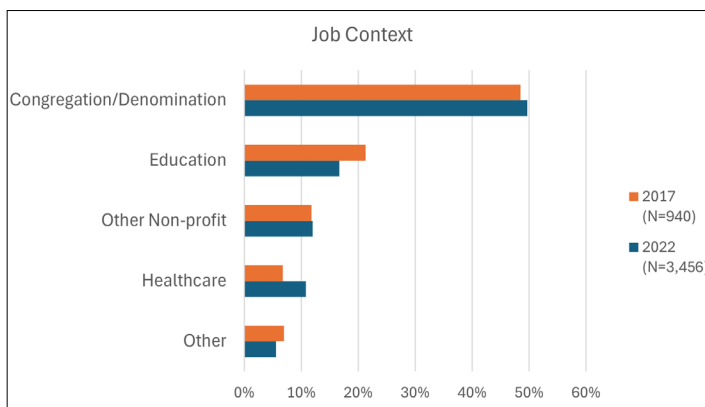


While the proportion of alums in Administration did not change from 2017, the context of the roles did. Administrators working in education remain the highest portion at 33%, but this is down from 42% in 2017. At the same time, administrators in healthcare jumped to 10% from 2% in 2017.

► **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:** *What is the situation at your school? In what kinds of jobs do your graduates serve? Have any shifted their original vocational plans?*

These shifts parallel changes in the broader sample. Alums shared the names of the organizations where they work, and these were coded into various context categories. Like in 2017, half of all alums work in congregations or denominations. While this continues to mean that another half of ATS graduates serve in organizations that are not congregations, this proportion has remained stable. The proportion of those who serve in educational contexts (17%)—including K-12, college, graduate theology, or Bible institutes—is down from 21% in 2017.

The proportion of alums who work in healthcare, on the other hand, rose from 7% in 2017 to 11% in 2022. Though the changes are not exceptionally large, the differences for educational and healthcare contexts are statistically significant. Finally, the percentage of alums employed in other nonprofit settings—community service, government, military—stayed about the same at 12%.



Together, these shifts may be related to the growing interest in well-being and increased awareness of the need for mental health work that grew during the pandemic. Jobs in mental health also often provide more financial stability than pastoral roles. The changes in

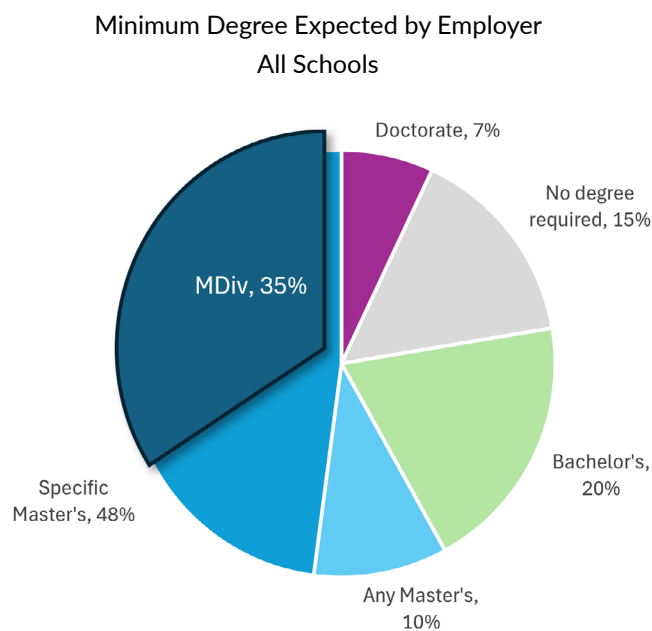
education may reflect the recent increase in administrative leadership transitions, seen not only in higher education but also in theological education.

Jobs differ by the ecclesial family and other aspects of the school the alum graduated from, as well as by race, gender, and degree earned. Further findings will be shared in future articles.

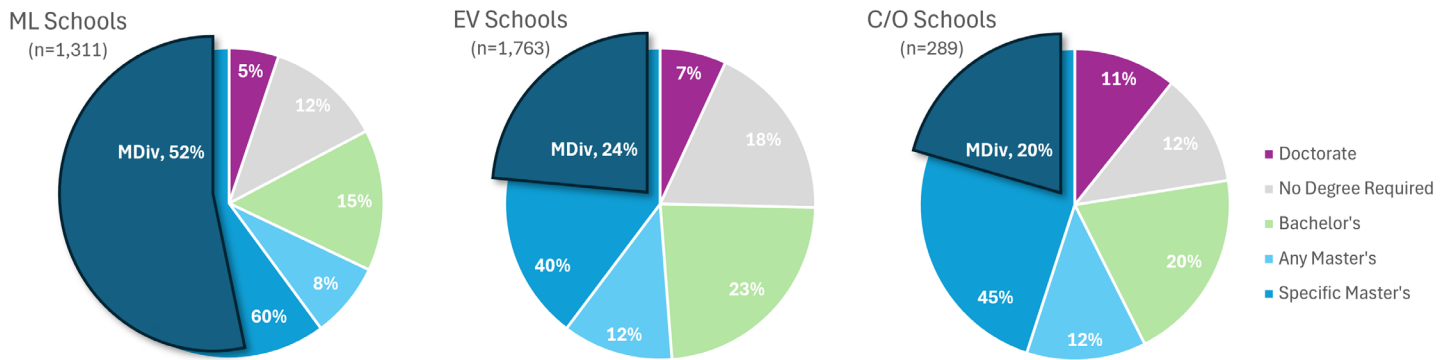
► **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:** *What does this mean for your school? Where do most of your graduates serve? Have you collected data about where your alums work? Has this changed since you last collected alum data?*

What degrees do employers expect?

We asked alums about their employers' expectations related to minimum degree for the job. Almost six out of ten alums say their employers expected some type of master's degree—10% of all alums reported any master's degree and 48% reported a specific master's degree. The greatest portion of the specific master's degrees is the MDiv, with 35% of all alums working for employers who require that degree.



The percentage of alums whose employers expected the MDiv is up from 27% in 2017. This is likely due to the higher proportion of participants from Mainline (ML) schools in this survey (39% vs. 31% in 2017), where



graduates from ML schools are far more apt to work for employers who expect the MDiv (see comparison graphs above). However, this representation is only part of the picture, as the increase in employers expecting the MDiv also rose among those who graduated from non-ML schools (23% vs. 18% in 2017).

Additional analysis will help ATS understand the relationship between expected degree and alum profile (e.g., school characteristics, individual demographics, where they serve), including identifying the reasons for this potential increase in demand for the MDiv. The MDiv is often thought of as the degree for those serving in congregations but, as reported above, the proportion of alums working in congregations has stayed about the same since 2017 and is likely not a major reason for the increase. Rather, it is healthcare that has seen an increase in the alum workforce and the majority of these are either counselors or chaplains.

Two additional notes speak to potential alignment gaps between degree earned and degree expected. First, only 56% of those who earned an MDiv are working for an employer who expected this degree for the role—44% may have pursued an expensive degree they did not need. Further analysis will be shared in future articles, but preliminary findings indicate this group has a higher share of younger alums—who may eventually work in jobs where the MDiv is expected—but also higher shares of women, alums of color, and alums from Evangelical schools. Second, though almost 60% of all alums work for employers who expected a master’s level degree, over a third (35%) work for employers who did not expect a

master’s degree at all. Both raise questions for schools regarding the value of a seminary education, having good clarity of mission, strong recruitment and advisement, and helping students understand the kinds of jobs that would best fit the degrees they are pursuing.

► **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:** *What does this mean for the industry of theological education and for your school? Do you know if the employers of your alums expect any particular degree? Are you offering the right degree for your constituents? If you offer several, how do you determine if students are pursuing the right ones for their vocational plans?*

On which competencies do alums most heavily rely?

Of the 48 total competencies coded from participant responses, the table at the top of the next page shows the top 20 for all alums and the proportion of alums who named each competency (contact gin@ats.edu for full list of competencies and their definitions). Participants were given multiple opportunities to respond, so totals equal more than 100%.

Overall, the list is the same as in 2017 (see [Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?](#))—19 are in the top 20 for both surveys. Though two data points are not yet a trend, initial indicators suggest that this list typifies a set of needed skills, knowledge, and dispositions for the religious workforce. Even with a global health pandemic and despite the near fourfold increase in participants for this second survey, the top 20 competencies have endured.

Top 20 Competencies—All Alums (N=2,835)

Rank	Competency	% of Alums
1	Spiritual disciplines	51%
2	Preaching	45%
3	Interpersonal competency	42%
4	Quality job performance	41%
5	Administration	40%
6	Pastoral care and counseling	39%
7	Leadership	37%
8	Active listening	35%
9	Intrapersonal competency	30%
10	Education and teaching	29%
11	Communication skills	28%
12	Theology	23%
13	Bible	23%
14	Finance	16%
15	Facilitating	13%
16	Intercultural competency	13%
17	Conflict resolution	13%
18	Organizational politics	12%
19	Difficult conversations	11%
20	Formation	10%

That said, the alum percentage rank order of the competencies has changed, considerably for some. The three that experienced the highest jumps are Interpersonal competency (13th in 2017 to 3rd in 2022), Quality job performance (18th to 4th), and Intrapersonal competency (20th to 9th). Interpersonal competency focuses on interaction with others, and it includes responses such as “helping others feel at ease” and “people skills.” Intrapersonal competency relates to self-awareness and self-care, and it includes responses such as “vulnerability”

and “resilience.” Quality job performance refers to competencies needed to do one’s work effectively, including “critical thinking,” “flexibility,” and “working to meet a deadline.”

Note: The rise in Quality job performance may be related to coding changes between the surveys. In 2017, Critical thinking was its own main theme code but, in 2022, was combined with Quality job performance as an example of cognitive dispositions needed for quality work. All other coding changes were made at the subtheme level.

It is notable that all three are soft competencies without a traditional disciplinary home in theological education. Inter- and Intrapersonal competencies might be thought of as having cognates in Pastoral care and counseling, Field education, or Formation, suggesting a connection to the earlier finding about the rise in jobs related to health-care during the global pandemic.

► **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:** *Do you know if there has been a shift in focus brought on by the global pandemic toward well-being and increased interest in mental health work for your school's graduates? How well situated is your school to address this increase if it is relevant for your alums?*

The three competencies with the greatest shifts downward in rank are Theology (4th in 2017 to 12th in 2022), Bible (8th to 13th), and Formation (12th to 20th). Responses coded as Theology include “Christian worldview,” “theology in cultural context,” and “ethics and application,” for example. Bible includes hermeneutics, biblical languages, methods for discussing the Bible, and biblical knowledge and literacy. Responses coded as Formation include “spiritual development,” “discipleship,” and “spirituality,” for example, and they differ from Spiritual disciplines that include both practices (e.g., prayer, reflection, and other devotional practices) and virtues (e.g., kindness, love, presence, generosity).

It is not entirely clear why the downward changes occurred—the school’s ecclesial family may be a contributing factor. However, Theology and Bible rank 13th or 14th for alums from both Evangelical and Mainline schools, and Theology ranks 6th and Bible ranks 15th for those from Catholic/Orthodox schools.

It is interesting to note that with the significant rise in the three competencies indicated above, half of the top ten are now soft competencies—Spiritual disciplines, Interpersonal competency, Quality job performance, Active listening, and Intrapersonal competency—where only two were in 2017. While many definitions exist to distinguish hard and soft competencies, most hard competency definitions would include some aspect of specificity or technical knowledge necessary to accomplish work. Our definition is similar and related to whether seminaries would typically have a course or discipline dedicated to the topic.

Soft competencies, on the other hand, refer to personal traits or abilities and would not normally constitute an entire course or discipline. It will be left to determine in the next survey if this shift simply reflects the needs of a decade that started with a global health crisis, or if it signals more permanent changes for the religious workforce. Several additional differences in top competencies emerged—job context, gender, race, degree earned—and will be shared in future articles.

One final list below displays the results of questions unique to this survey: Were there any new skills, knowledge, or competencies you had to learn last year? If so, what were they?

Top 10 New Skills—All Alums (N=2,245)

Rank	Competency	% of Alums
1	Technology	51%
2	Pastoral care and counseling	17%
3	Liturgics and workshop	14%
4	Administration	13%
5	Communication skills	11%
6	Ministry experience	11%
7	Education and teaching	10%
8	None	9%
9	Leadership	6%
10	Quality job performance	4%

Not surprisingly, Technology is at the top of the list by far, with just more than half reporting this as a new skill alums needed. It also just missed the top 20 list of competencies on which alums most rely, reflecting another large jump from 2017 (31st to 21st). Technology was expanded in this survey to include more subtopics (digital production, online/remote skills, and social media, for example) to accommodate the wide array of responses for this topic.

In addition, the top seven new skills are competencies for which new technology or pandemic-related subthemes were added—telehealth, worship in online settings, crisis management, digital ministry, and online teaching. Alums' responses further indicate deeper questions they are facing about how to build or sustain community with online/hybrid church if congregational ways of being continue to be hybrid in the long-term future. ATS will be watching how alums' needs shift or remain in the 2027 survey.

► **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:** *Assuming the future of congregational life has some online component, is your school ready to prepare current and future clergy and ministers? How much of a need is there among your alums for understanding what it means to “be church” in an online-everything world?*



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