

Field Education

STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS

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The Seminary to Early Ministry Study





The Study

The data for this report come from the Seminary to Early (SEM) Study, a long-term study designed to paint the most comprehensive picture to date of how seminary forms students and prepares them for their careers. It is designed to generate data-driven solutions for improving the training and wellbeing of seminarians. Currently focused on Duke Divinity School students, we are surveying and interviewing three cohorts of students during their schooling and into the first five years of ministry. The study explores a range of factors including students' physical, mental, social, and spiritual health; career paths; social networks; beliefs and attitudes; and personality. By prospectively evaluating students, we hope to learn how these and other factors predict flourishing in ministry.

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The Seminary to Early Ministry Study

James R. Duke
THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

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Executive Summary

This report uses survey data from the summers of 2020 and 2021 and interview data from 2020 to examine student field education experiences of 186 students, two-thirds of which took place in churches. Overall, we found students had positive field education experiences, with 75% reporting their internships as “good” or “excellent.” Students described field education as an essential conduit for discerning their calling. Notably, compared to those with good experiences, students with poor field education experiences were significantly more likely to switch their intended career path away from congregational ministry. Two prominent factors emerged as key shapers of field education experiences: relationships and direct ministry experiences.

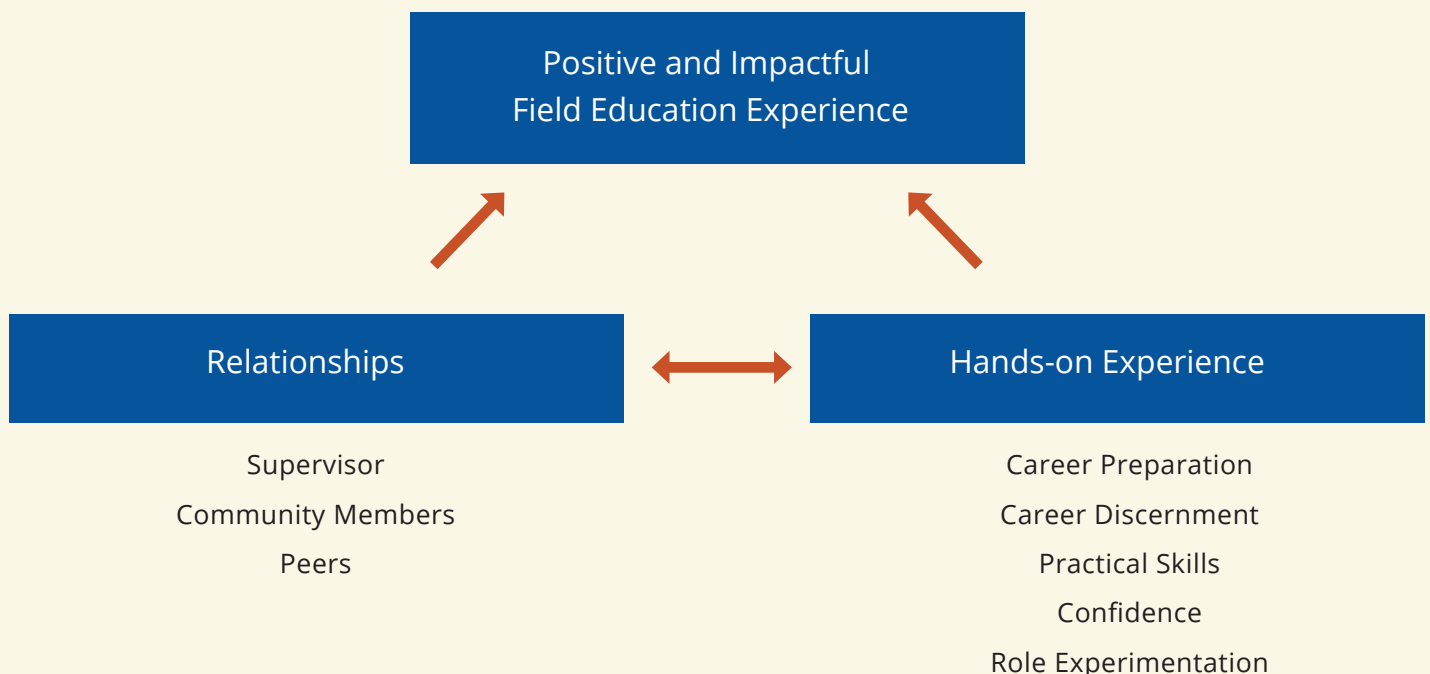
RELATIONSHIPS

We identified three relationships vital to impactful internships: relationships with supervisors, communities, and peers. While each was important, the student-supervisor relationship stood out as

especially critical. Students’ sense of closeness to and frequency of meeting with their supervisors were the best predictors of positive internship experiences. This suggests that investing in identifying and supporting quality supervisors could pay major dividends in enhancing the quality of student field education experiences.

For students considering an “embodied” profession like pastoral ministry, connecting with the communities they are serving is also vitally important. This was a challenge for students interning virtually in Summer 2020. Students were much more likely to report feeling a sense of disconnect and isolation in virtual placements.

We also found that ideological differences between students and the communities they served were an obstacle for some. In particular, students who were either more liberal or conservative than most people in their placement site tended



to feel less welcomed. Interns who were more liberal than their organizations also had difficulty connecting with their supervisors. In most Mainline Protestant denominations, a majority of members are politically conservative. By contrast, students are overwhelmingly left-leaning. It is crucially important to give students the skills to effectively lead congregations that are ideologically different from the pastor. This is especially important in the United Methodist Church, which operates under an appointment system.

Finally, the opportunity to connect with other peers during their community reflection groups was impactful for many students. Students emphasized the importance of journeying with others in similar geographic settings through the Communities of Learning. The groups allowed students to process their experiences with others in a similar context. These interactions also helped students feel connected to one another and to Duke, especially amid COVID-related isolation. Even in Summer 2021, isolation was a fairly common experience for students on placements. Our data suggest peer learning groups can help reduce isolation.

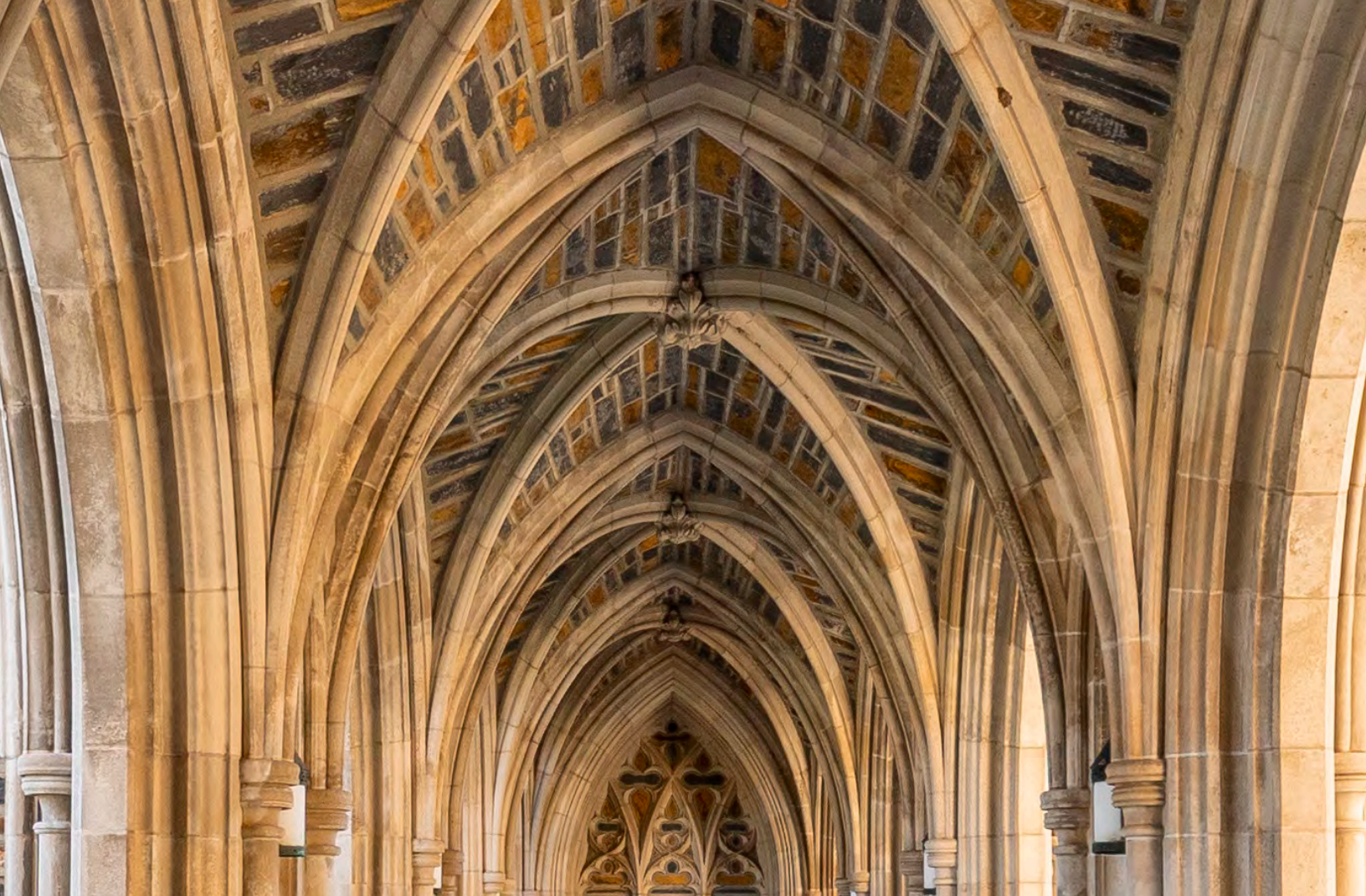
HANDS-ON EXPERIENCES

From our research, it was clear that successful field placements give students ample meaningful and varied opportunities to engage in ministry. Students noted that their internships helped them build or refine practical skills in key areas of ministry such as preaching, pastoral care, and leading a Bible study. However, not all placements give students rich experiential opportunities—a significant minority of students reported working fewer than 20 hours a week. This was especially, but not exclusively, a problem for virtual internships and had a profound impact on students' career trajectories. Students who worked 20 or fewer hours per week were

considerably more likely than their peers to change their career path away from congregational ministry. We should note that it was not clear from responses whether students reporting fewer than 20 hours a week were only reporting hours spent working at their placement and not the total hours worked inclusive of other field education requirements (e.g., community portfolios and meetings with peers).

While we separate out relationships and hands-on experience in this report, in reality, they are interconnected. Good supervisor relationships are associated with more hands-on experiences for students. At the same time, career discernment is not merely the product of trying out a task or role but also of talking through experiences with others (especially supervisors and peers). Likewise, nurturing a sense of calling and commitment to congregational ministry requires a supportive ministry environment, which necessarily entails developing the skills to live in communities that are ideologically diverse and often different than the pastor.

Finally, we should underscore how the restrictions associated with COVID-19 had a major impact on students' abilities to develop relationships and gain meaningful hands-on experience. During Summer 2020, when most students were participating in virtual internships, many reported facing challenges developing close relationships with their supervisors and connecting with the communities they were serving. Although it may be possible for students to have impactful virtual field education placements, our data suggest that in-person internships facilitate developing meaningful relationships, getting robust hands-on experiences, and consequently having an overall positive internship experience.

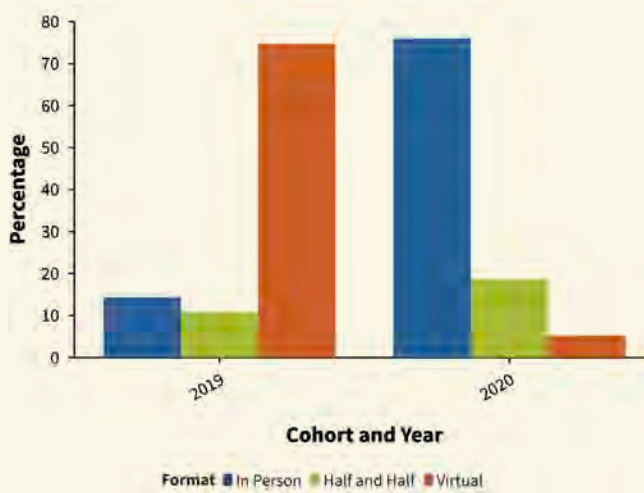


The Purpose of this Report

The Duke Endowment asked the Seminary to Early Ministry Study to learn about student experiences during field education placements. In this report, we analyze data collected from students to help understand, from the student perspective, **what makes a positive field education experience**. Our analysis focuses on the views and experiences of students. This report is not an evaluation of the field education program. Rather, we offer it as a resource to help understand student experiences during their summer field education placements and support the training of healthy and effective leaders.

The Data

Internship Format



In this report, we focus on data from the Duke Divinity School’s entering classes of 2019 and 2020. For each cohort, we gathered data in the fall of their first and second years, a period that spans the summer when many students complete a field education placement.

Without question, Summer 2020 was an unusual experience for students. Nearly all students completed field education remotely, whereas most of the entering class of 2020 completed internships in person (in Summer 2021). As a result, a key feature of our data is that it enables us to compare the experiences of virtual and in-person field education experiences.

Our survey data includes responses from the entering classes of 2019 and 2020. In total, 186 students who participated in field education during their first summer also completed surveys both before and after their placements – 111 from the entering class of 2019 and 75 from 2020. We also randomly selected a subset of 35 students from the 2019 class to participate in 90-minute in-depth interviews. The students we interviewed are largely representative of their broader cohort in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and religious tradition.

2019 Cohort



2020 Cohort



At the time of writing, we had only conducted interviews with students who did field education during the summer of 2020 (follow-up interviews with the entering class of 2020 are underway). Given the differences between students’ experiences during the summers of 2020 and 2021, **it is important to note that quotations used in this report are representative of students who interned in Summer 2020 and do not represent typical field education experiences.**

Overview of Placements

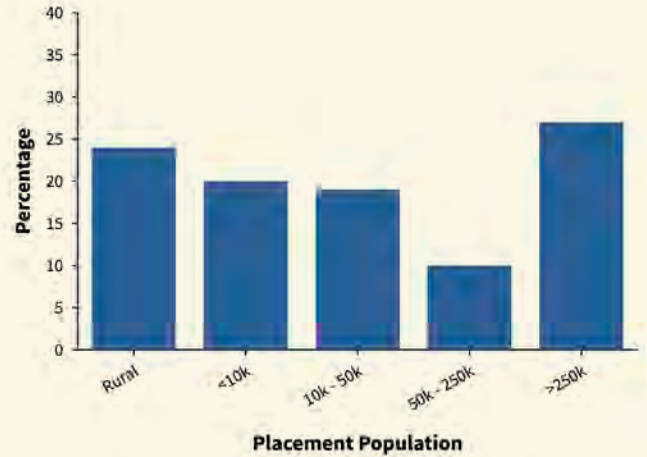
Roughly two-thirds (65%) of the students we surveyed who participated in field education served in congregational ministry. Another 23% of students interned in non-profits, while the remaining 12% worked in camp ministry, clinical pastoral education, or elsewhere.

Nearly all of the placements were in North Carolina (88%), with most students serving in rural areas. Forty-four percent of students served in towns or areas with a population of less than 10,000, compared to 24% who worked in a larger city. Nevertheless, internships tended to be closer to Duke, with about half of them located within 25 miles of Duke's campus. By contrast, only 27% of placements were at least 100 miles away from campus.

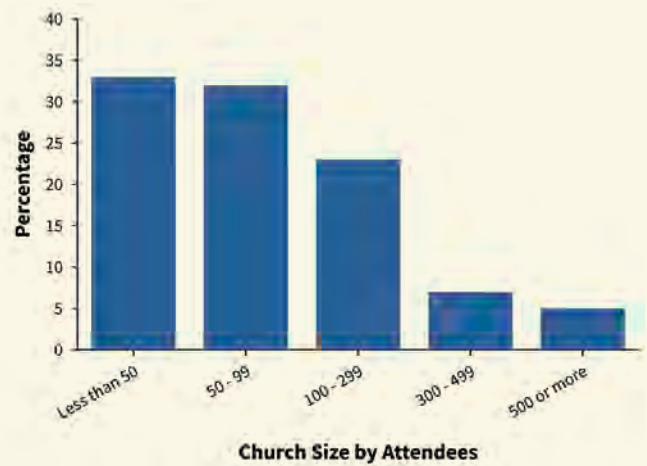
Among the students who worked in congregational ministry, they typically served smaller churches. Specifically, two-thirds of these placements were in churches with fewer than 100 weekly attendees. Only 11% of the congregations had over 300 weekly attendees. Most Divinity students reported attending a church during the semester larger than 100 regular attenders. While students tend to attend churches larger than the ones they served, the size of the congregations where students interned mirrors the overall distribution of Protestant churches in the United States. According to the National Congregations Study,¹ most churches are small. The median attendance of Protestant churches in the US was 75 in 2019, and only one-third of congregations had over 250 weekly attendees.

Finally, 15% of the students we surveyed participated in self-initiated placements. These were far more common in Summer 2021 than 2020 (23% versus 9%).

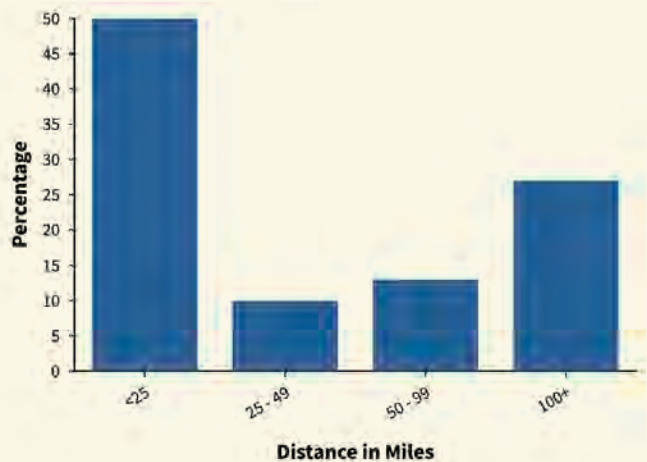
Placement Population Size



Average Number of Weekly Attendees in Churches Served



Placement Location (Miles from Duke)



¹ See <https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/> for more information.

Overall Experiences

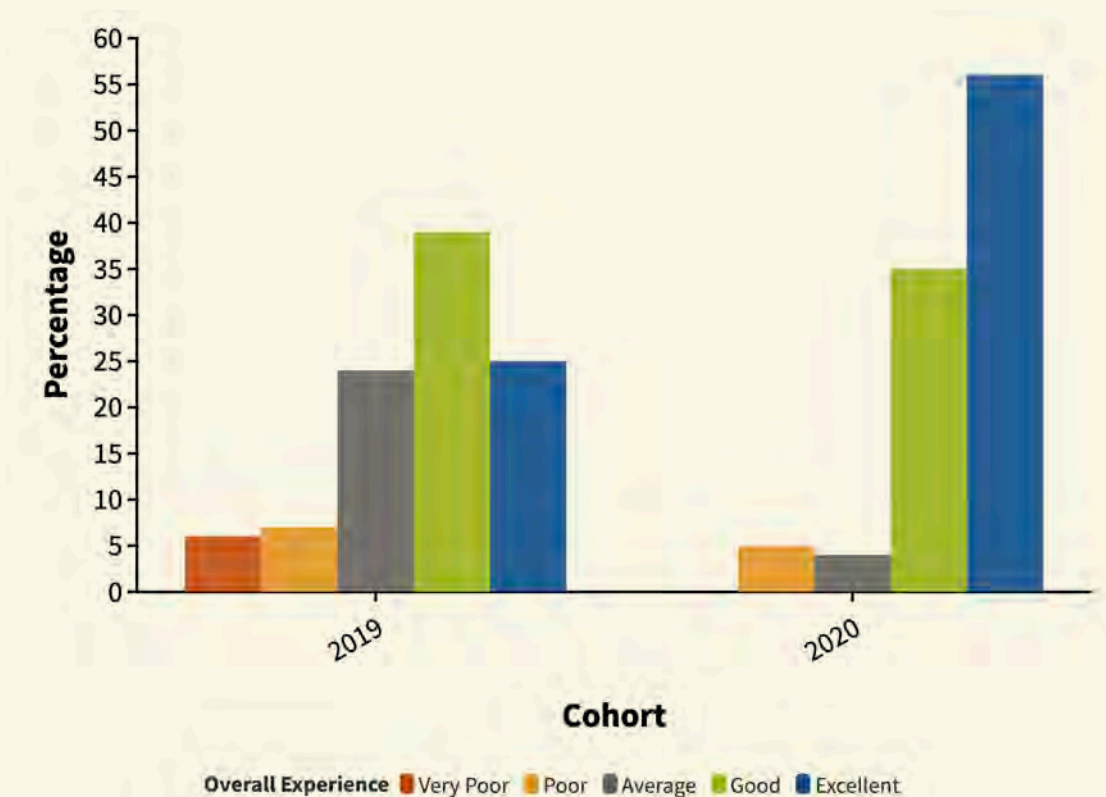
Students reported having positive experiences during their internships. During the past two summers, 75% of students reported having “good” or “excellent” overall experiences, while only 10% reported their experiences as “poor” or “very poor.”

For those who come to Divinity School planning to pursue congregational ministry, a positive internship experience is a powerful predictor of whether they will continue on this path. By comparing vocational goals across each cohort, we can see this phenomenon clearly.

Unsurprisingly, the 2020 entering class, who completed mostly in-person placements in Summer

2021, had better experiences than the previous cohort. We found 56% of students in the second cohort had “excellent” overall experiences, compared to only 26% of students in the first. Likewise, students in Summer 2021 were considerably less likely than those in 2020 to have a “poor” or “very poor” overall experience (5% versus 14%). A similar disparity is evident when we look at the career aspirations of these two classes. The proportion of the first cohort planning on pursuing congregational ministry *dropped* ten points from 54% in their first year to 44% in their second, compared to a seven-point *increase* among the second cohort (from 47% to 54%). These differences are a clear indication of how the quality of field education internships can significantly alter the career paths of some students.

Overall Experiences by Entering Class

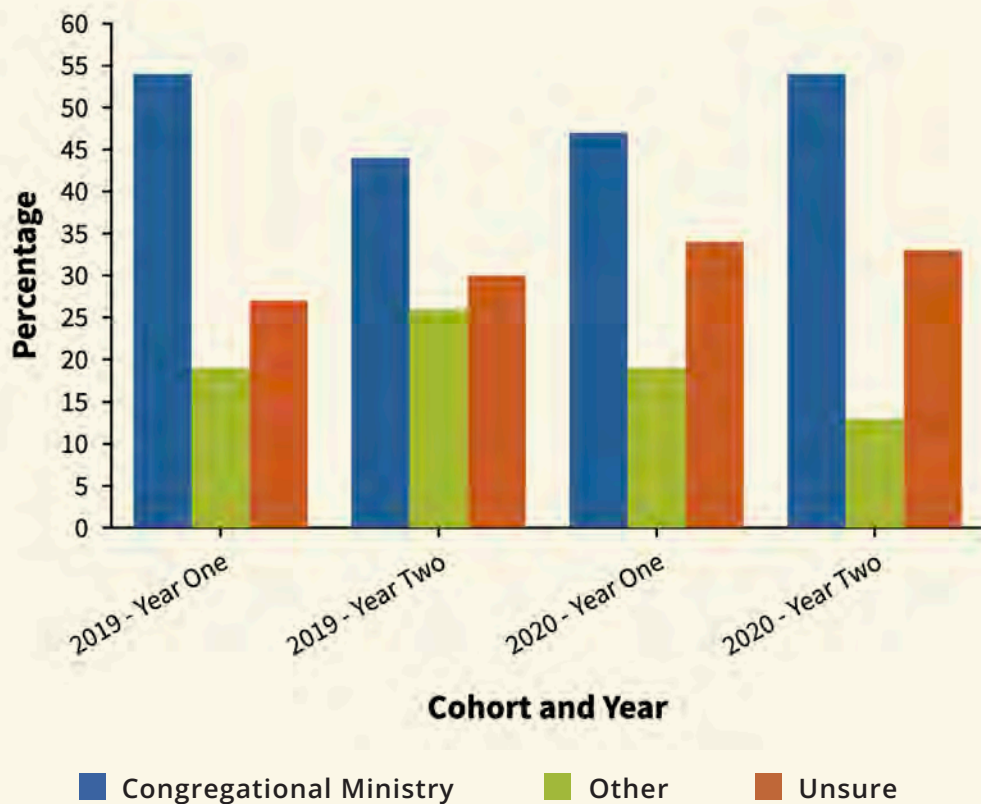


In the beginning, my placement was very positive – it reaffirmed what I wanted to do for my call, but in the end, it was very negative because I think I questioned every other week, whether or not I was actually doing the right thing, whether youth ministry was what I wanted to do for my call, whether I even had a call ... and so I was, “Maybe I’m just not cut out for ministry.” It made me think deeper about, did I really want to work in a church, which I’m glad the experience did happen, because I realized that I didn’t want to work in a church building.

We also want to underscore the point that field education is a discernment process. While the hope is that people will find congregational ministry attractive, some come to realize through field education that maybe it is not for them.

This caveat aside, comparing the differences in experiences across the two cohorts does suggest that a negative field education experience may unnecessarily drive people away from a career in congregational leadership. This underscores the importance of identifying the factors that may help promote positive and meaningful field education experiences. As we looked across both the survey responses and the in-depth interviews, two key factors emerged: *relationships and hands-on experiences*.

Career Changes by Year



Relationships

We identified three types of relationships that are foundational to impactful internships: relationships with supervisors, communities, and peers. Although the importance of the student-supervisor relationship stood above the others, each plays a key role in shaping the field education experience.

I think the most positive aspect ... was the relationships formed with staff, the pastor ... my mentor ... people in the groups that I was a part of, and just getting to learn from people that are in a different context, in a different place, but are still doing and carrying out faithful ministry. I think that was definitely the most helpful part.

SUPERVISORS

Our surveys and interviews included several questions about the nature of students' relationships with their supervisors. Overall, the students we surveyed who interned during the past two summers were satisfied with their relationships with their field education supervisor:

- 78% said they had a "good" or "excellent" overall experience with their supervisor
- 61% reported that their supervisors had "very" or "extremely clear" expectations
- 44% said they were "very" or "extremely close" to their supervisor

We found that the quality of the student-supervisor relationship was a key predictor of a positive and impactful field education experience. For example, virtually all of the students (99%) who were "very" or "extremely close" with their supervisor had a "good" or "excellent" overall experience, compared to only

57% of interns who did not have a close relationship with their supervisor.

The role of supervisors in shaping students' experiences varied between the two cohorts we surveyed. In many respects, supervisor relationships were more important in 2020 than in 2021. Having a supervisor with clear expectations, who met frequently with interns, and developed close relationships with them was particularly influential for the first cohort. In 2020, only 44% of students with less than a "very close" relationship with their supervisor reported having a "good" or "excellent" overall experience. By contrast, 82% of students in 2021 with a similar relationship to their supervisor had a positive overall experience.

This difference may reflect the nature of virtual field education placements. Students in Summer 2020 overwhelmingly participated in their internship remotely. As a result, students may have been especially reliant upon their supervisors connecting them with congregants and staff members and delegating work.

The fact that interns with closer relationships with their supervisors worked more hours in 2020 supports this idea. During this summer, only 19% of interns who reported working 20 hours or less per week at their internship had a "very" or "extremely" close relationship with their supervisors. By contrast, 54% of the students who worked over 30 hours per week at their internship had close relationships with their supervisors. We did not find a similar relationship between hours worked and supervisor relationships for interns in Summer 2021.

Our data support the idea that giving students more tasks has a major impact on how they evaluate their experiences. In Summer 2020, 85% of students who worked more than 30 hours per week had "good" or "excellent" experiences compared to only 35% who worked 20 or fewer hours.

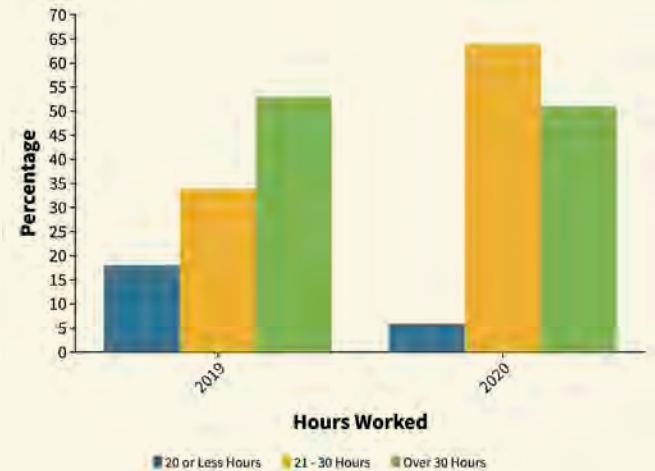
There wasn't really anything to do ... Virtually, it's really hard. I could call people and check up on them and do pastoral care calls and things like that ... I couldn't do consistent preaching ... The opportunities just weren't there to really do much.

Being given more opportunities during field education is, of course, partly a function of having a good supervisory relationship. However, even after considering how close students were with their supervisors, there is still a significantly positive correlation between how many hours they worked and students' assessment of their overall experiences. This suggests that having a supervisor who both effectively delegated tasks and formed close relationships with interns was vitally important for having a positive internship experience, especially in Summer 2020.

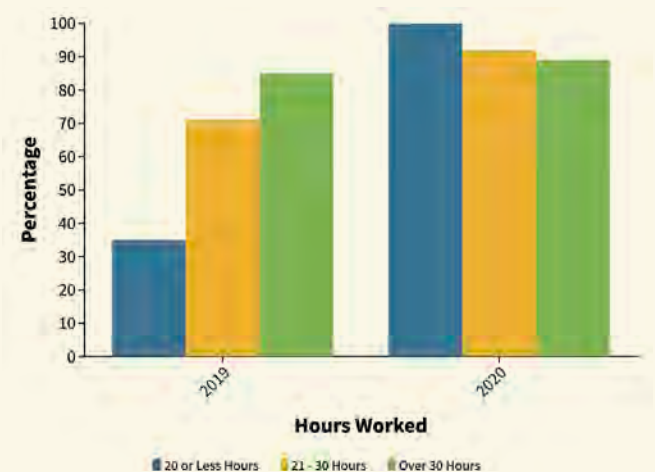
Given the central role supervisors play in shaping students' experiences, we sought to identify the factors influencing student-supervisor relationships. Pandemic-related restrictions played a central role. Students interning in Summer 2021 were more likely than those in 2020 to report having a "good" or "excellent" overall experience with their supervisor (83% versus 75%) or having a supervisor with "very" or "extremely clear" expectations (64% versus 60%). However, the biggest impact appeared to be on how close students were to their supervisors. While 54% of interns reported being "very" or "extremely close" to their supervisor in 2021, only 36% had a similarly close relationship in 2020. This gap may be due to a range of factors, including the challenge of building deep relationships virtually and the extent to which supervisors were overwhelmed by the demands of COVID-19 in their ministry settings.

Another key factor that shapes the student-supervisor relationship is gender. Supervisors were much more likely to be men (70%) than

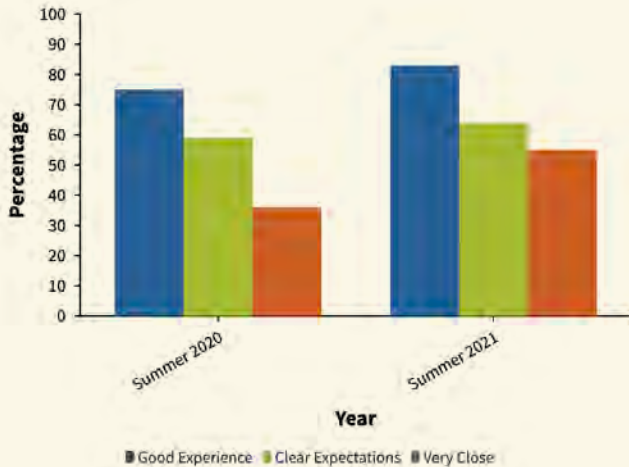
Closeness to Supervisors Based on Hours Worked



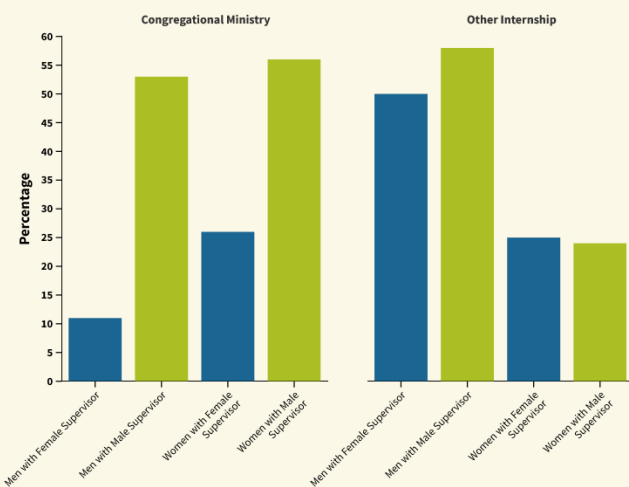
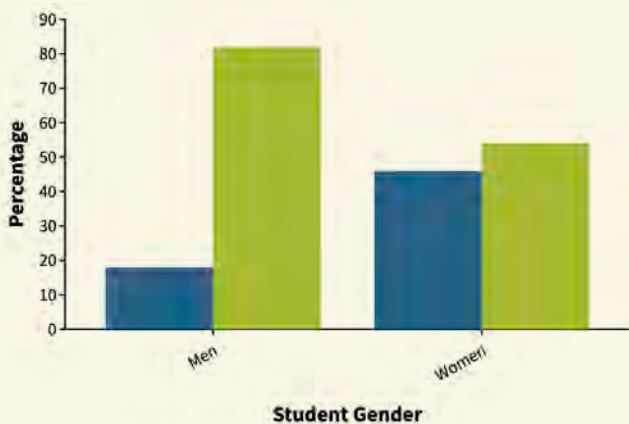
Percent with a Very Good or Excellent Overall Experience



Experiences with Supervisors (by Year)



Student and Supervisor Gender



women (30%). Men were often matched with male supervisors (86% of the time), whereas 46% of women had female supervisors. The gender of both the student and the supervisor played an important role in how students rated their overall experience.

Overall, male divinity students rated relationships with their supervisors as closer than women students. Fifty-one percent of men versus 34% of women had “very” or “extremely close” relationships with their supervisors. Surprisingly, gender correspondence between the student and their supervisor did not account for differences in how men and women rated closeness to their supervisors. In fact, both men and women rated closeness lower with female supervisors (54% of students reported being very or extremely close with male supervisors versus 21% for female supervisors). We do not know why students rated women supervisors differently than men. We do know from survey data that male supervisors were more likely to meet with the interns more than once a week (38% of male versus 21% of female supervisors). This suggests female supervisors may have more time pressures, giving them less time to devote to supervision. In separate work, we found positive role models of women in pastoral leadership are a key factor for helping young women discern a call to pastoral ministry.

We also collected information about supervisors’ race for the 2020 entering cohort. However, because all Black students (n=14) and nearly all White students (93%, n=56) had a supervisor of the same race, our survey data do not allow us to speak to the potential challenges and benefits of cross-racial student-supervisor relationships. As data collection continues, we will be able to assess this relationship in more detail.

Nevertheless, our interview data from the entering class of 2019 illustrates a potential challenge of working in a race-matched placement. One Black student working in a Black church reported experiencing little personal growth, as this church closely resembled the congregation where she regularly worships. This student recognized

the importance of stretching experiences in field education. However, this is not to say that cross-racial placements are always preferable or come without challenges. They are likely accompanied by their own unique set of challenges (e.g., a less-welcoming supervisor and congregation).

Finally, three of our interviewees experienced a change of supervisors during their placement. In each case, the change in supervisor was the result of a pastoral transition within the congregation. Supervisor changes can make it more difficult for students to form meaningful relationships with their supervisors, especially given the importance of supervisor relationships for impactful and formative field experiences. There is also a greater potential for students to “get lost” in the midst of a pastoral change.

It was during pastoral transition, so [my supervisor] was only there for two weeks. And then another pastor came in. So, the outgoing pastor was basically checked out ... And then, the incoming pastor was just completely disoriented for two weeks. So, me and my partner ... we were basically just like self-starters for the first four weeks ... Didn't accomplish any of my learning goals.

What makes a good supervisor?

<p>Frequent and Meaningful Conversations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frequent meetings ▪ Open and vulnerable – shared personal stories and struggles ▪ Discussed the how's and why's (not just what's) of ministry ▪ Discussed theology and moral values ▪ Discussed personal lives and issues beyond work ▪ Available for conversation outside required meetings 	<p><i>“Honestly, we had a pretty great relationship ... We met a couple of times a week and one of those meetings would just be for practical things and making sure that we were staying on task. And then one of those meetings was lit-erally just to talk and hear about life, talk about theology. We read two different books together which was really great for me ... I had a really positive experience with my supervisor.”</i></p> <p><i>“He's very open to talk. He's been just a phenomenal mentor ... I feel like he has been super helpful and talking things through and is always accepting ... He has been phenomenal about being open to having any type of discussion.”</i></p> <p><i>“Each week ... he'd give me a scenario and say, “Here's a situation that I've dealt with in this church. How would you handle it?” And we talked through it and typically af-terwards he tells me, “Well, here's how I handled it. Here's why I think I did an okay job or why it was a horrible deci-sion.” And so that did help, getting to speak with a pastor that was actively pastoring a church ... So that was good.”</i></p>
<p>Empowerment-Feedback and Encouragement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supportive and encouraging ▪ Gave detailed, frequent, and constructive feedback ▪ Provided space for the student to pursue personal interests and new projects (with guidance) 	<p><i>“I would see him every day and he would give me little doses of feedback ... It was definitely really helpful because after I gave a little church talk or whatever, he would have immediate but constructive feedback on how I can get them to be more engaged and that kind of thing. So, I would say that the constructive feedback was good ...He does it in a way that's actually helpful, and not makes you feel like an idiot.”</i></p> <p><i>“She was great ... very patient and understanding ... She gave me opportunities to be creative and to do things that I didn't always feel comfortable doing, like pushing me to preach and things like that, but in a very nice and respectful way. So, I think that was the best part was just her guidance and having her encourage me and tell me that I could do that.”</i></p>

Communities

Connecting with communities is a vital component of field education placements. While numerous factors influence how well students connect with those they serve, two stood out in our analysis: virtual placements and ideologies.

VIRTUAL PLACEMENTS

Most students in 2020 completed their field education experiences virtually. Virtual placements were difficult for students. They made it hard to connect with the organizations and people students were serving. Their struggles underscore how pastoral ministry is an “embodied” profession; the skills to lead a church cannot be learned over Zoom.

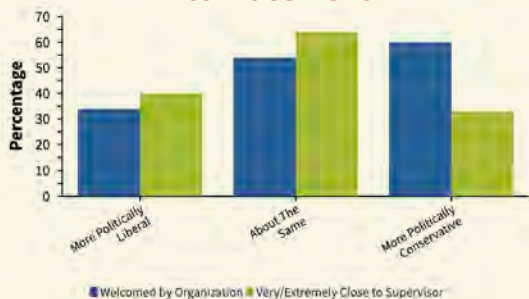
I think not being able to be there in person really took a lot away, at least for me. I really wanted to be out there ... and I think I would have built better relationships with the community had I been able to be there in person. I feel like I really missed out when it comes to that ... I think that was the hardest part of it was feeling a little bit disembodied and not connected with the community.”

The survey data reflects the interviewees’ sense of disconnect during their virtual internships. We asked students in each cohort how isolated they felt during field education. In Summer 2020, students were considerably less likely to report feeling “not at all isolated” in their placements than students the next year (26% versus 49%). That said, a considerable number of students reported some feelings of isolation during their placements. For both students and supervisors, it is hard to integrate a summer intern into the life of the church or organization. We suspect that it may be helpful to prepare students for the possibility that they may feel isolated and a lack clarity about their role and give them strategies to manage these emotions.

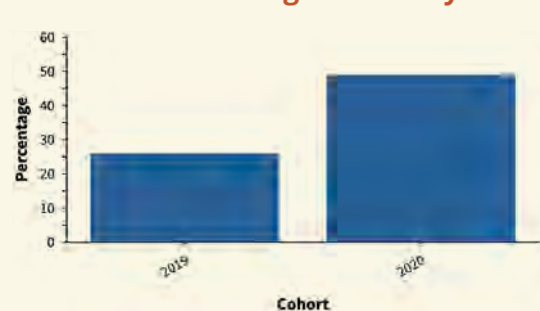
IDEOLOGY

Another factor influencing students’ overall internship experiences was the ideological composition of the congregation or organization they served. In our survey, students compared their political and theological ideologies to those in the organizations they served. Students were asked to identify whether their field education organization was more liberal or conservative than themselves. Mirroring larger trends in Mainline churches, interns tended to be more liberal than the people in the organizations they served, both politically and theologically. For example, 53% of students reported being more politically liberal than their organization. Only 8% of students indicated being more conservative.

Intern Ideology Compared to Placement



Students Not Feeling Isolated by Cohort



This is important because ideological differences between students and the congregations they serve impact how welcomed students felt and how close they were with their supervisors: two key determinants of positive overall field education internships. More politically liberal students struggled to connect with their supervisors, and students mismatched ideologically with their placements sites felt less welcomed. This finding is in line with previous research on this topic.

In general, Duke Divinity students are more liberal than the average United Methodist congregation. This underscores the importance of equipping students to minister across political and theological lines of difference. Exposing students to ways to manage these differences may help prepare them for their future ministry. Theological reflections groups may also be important sites for students to reflect on how ideological diversity has impacted their experience of ministry. While disparities between the ideologies of students and organizations will likely always be challenging, preparatory work and an intentional system of support may lessen the negative impact of ideological differences on job satisfaction when students move into their careers and lay the groundwork for a fruitful internship.

I really enjoyed the Community of Learning. I feel like I got to connect with other students that were in the area and hear about what they were doing. And I think that helped me feel like I'm still connected to the Duke Divinity community ... feeling like there were other students that I could reach out to and talk to during field ed, that was really helpful ... So overall a positive, really good experience with the community of learning.”

PEERS — COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Peer interactions and relationships formed through community reflection groups were also impactful for many students. In our survey, 57% of students who interned during Summer 2020 “mostly” or “completely” agreed that they reflected deeply on their field education experiences during their Community of Learning meetings. Forty-eight percent similarly agreed that their Community of Learning meetings enhanced their overall field education experiences.

I felt our group was great ... I thought we had really fruitful discussions, and just learned a lot in getting to speak to one another and process what was happening. I wish it was in person. I mourn the loss of not getting to have that type of group in-person. But overall, I think it was pretty good.”

In the interviews, students spoke positively about the opportunity to interact with peers – to share experiences, form relationships, and learn from one another. Fourteen (50%) of the students we spoke with mentioned peer interaction as the primary benefit of the Community of Learning groups. Students reported that these small group meetings consisted of “fruitful discussions” and that they “learned a lot” from hearing other students’ experiences and perspectives. These interactions also helped students feel connected to one another and to Duke, especially amid COVID-related isolation. Broadly speaking, our findings suggest that opportunities to listen, learn from, and develop relationships with their peers serving in similar contexts are the most valued and impactful aspects of the Community of Learning.

Different Experiences with Communities of Learning

Positive	Negative
<p><i>“I really enjoyed it. It was nice to kind of talk through the realities of what field ed looks like and the things that you’ve come up against with another group of students who also are in the same exact boat. And it was all based on location and so that was kind of neat because they were all in the same county, so when we talk about demographics and things like that, it applied to all of us because we were all kind of in that same location or history of a town. That was nice. I really enjoyed that.”</i></p>	<p><i>“It was helpful in some ways, like learning about the community that I was in and helping with, but the range and scope of the Community of Learning was a little wide, so I was in the rural area and the other people in my Community of Learning were all in the local city, kind of urban area nearby in a college town. So, for them, it was a very different experience from my own. It kind of felt like I was singled out as like, “Oh, that’s the rural guy and everyone else is at these urban churches.”</i></p>

Hands-On Experience

Field education is fundamentally about receiving hands-on experience. It is a time for students to engage firsthand in the practice of ministry. It should therefore come as no surprise that the quality and amount of hands-on experience students received during their internships were predictive of their overall experiences.

The reason I enjoy my field education so much is because ... instead of just learning about ministry, I get to do ministry ... You still need to learn about the stuff, but it’s more fulfilling to actually get to do what you want to do than to just learn about it.

As was mentioned earlier, the number of hours students worked was particularly impactful in Summer 2020. Working more hours during this summer led to considerably better internship experiences. This phenomenon is almost certainly a consequence of the pandemic and illustrates the challenges of virtual internships in organizations that would otherwise only accommodate in-person placements. In Summer 2020, students simply did not work much during their

internships. Sixty-three percent of interns worked an average of 30 or fewer hours per week, with over half of these students working 20 or fewer hours per week.

These low numbers of reported hours may, in part, be related to students who only reported the hours working at their placement site and not the hours spent engaging with Divinity School programming. Even considering reporting differences, this analysis suggests many students did not work even close to full time. Looking at data from the 2020 cohort, 75% of students in Summer 2021 worked over 30 hours per week during their internship. Doing in-person placements significantly boosted the number of hours worked.

I got some more experience preparing Bible studies, writing sermons and things of that nature. But because we’re still trying to figure everything out ... the church didn’t really have a lot for me to do. We were constantly having to come up with stuff to do. I didn’t get nearly as much experience or growth as I would’ve thought for field ed.

Beyond impacting the overall internship experiences of students, the number of hours students work profoundly influenced their career trajectories. Among the students who entered divinity school planning on pursuing a career in congregational ministry and interned at a church, those who worked 20 or fewer hours per week were considerably more likely to change their career objectives. Conversely, nearly every one of these students who worked over 30 hours per week continued their plan to pursue a career in congregational ministry after their internship.

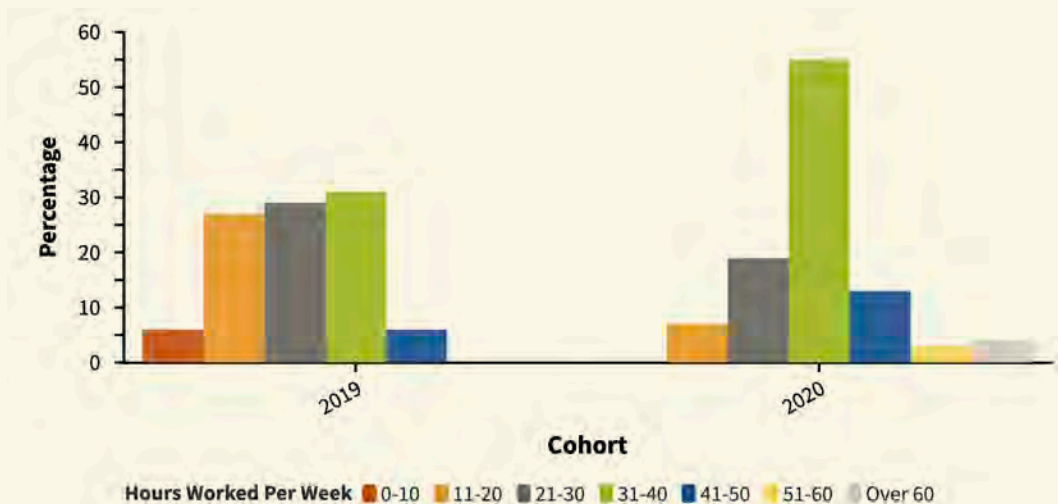
I think it may have started the crisis of calling a little bit ... because it was pretty boring and I didn't get the full experience. That really made me want to, for my next placement, have something like camp ministry, that's going to go a little bit outside of my comfort zone ... Because it just felt repetitive... It was not something that I would have wanted my everyday job to be like. That could have been COVID, that could have been the job itself.

Our interviews flesh this out further. They suggest that hands-on experience is associated with better

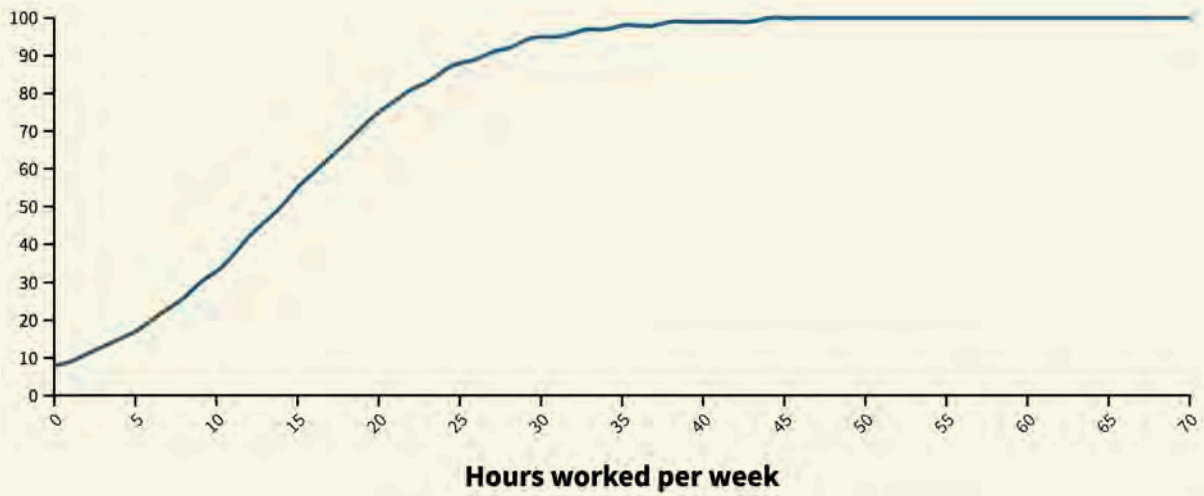
career preparation and career discernment. In terms of preparation, students reported that their internships helped them build or refine practical skills in key areas of ministry such as preaching, pastoral care, leading a Bible study, and/or engaging with lay leaders and church staff. Many also reported that these hands-on experiences bolstered their confidence and feelings of self-efficacy.

Students also discussed field education as an opportunity to “try out” an occupational role and test its “fit” – in other words, to gauge whether the role aligned with students’ interests, passions, skills, and/or abilities. The impact of field education on students’ intended career path took three primary forms. For nearly half of the students we spoke with, this first-hand experience *affirmed* pre-existing career plans and strengthened their commitment to them. In discussing this form of impact, students mentioned both internal affirmation (e.g., subjective feelings of fit) and external forms of affirmation (e.g., encouragement from supervisor or lay members) that they were on the right path. Other students told us that their field education experience refined their sense of calling – these students reported additional clarity regarding which specific path they should follow. Some also reported it influenced the particular kind of pastor (or chaplain) they wanted to be. Still, other students told us that field education *changed* their career plans – either by exposing them to a different career path or helping them realize that they did not want to pursue the path they were on. In our view, these are all important experiences for students to have before they start their careers.

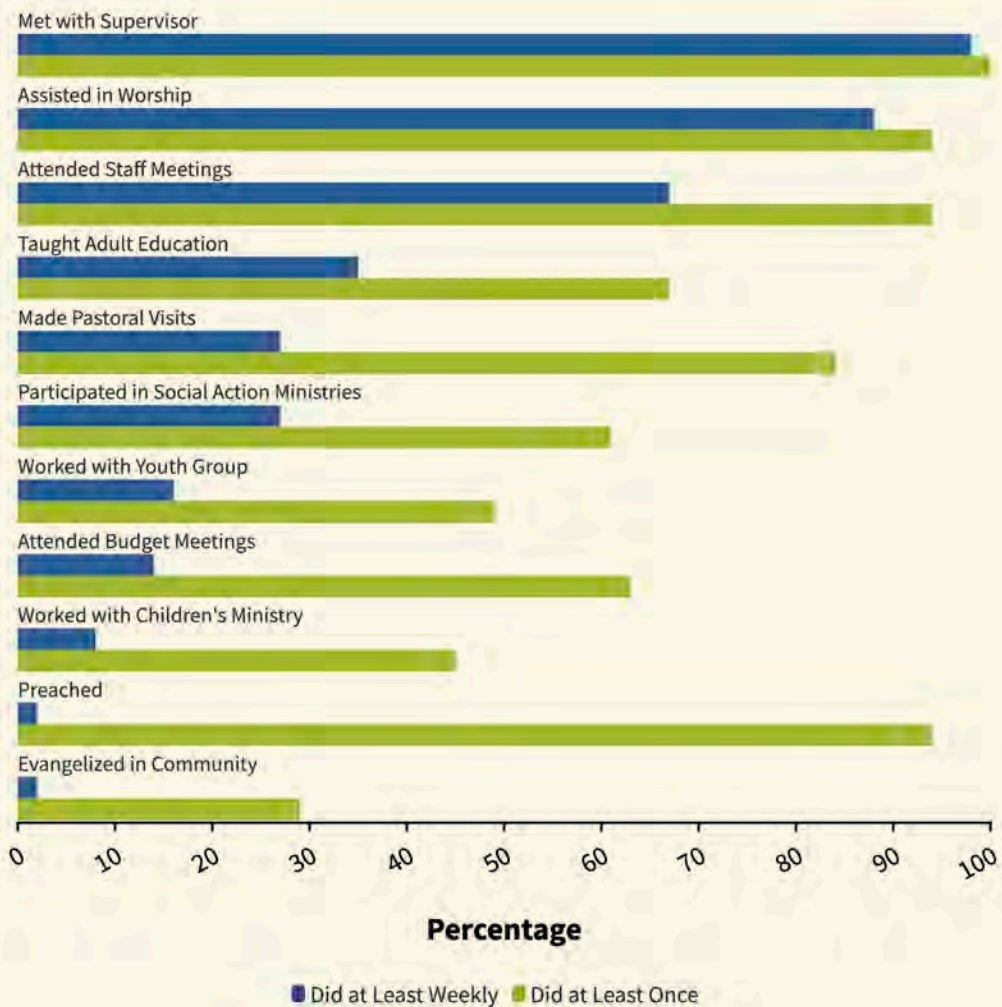
Hours Worked Per Week



Predicted Probability of Pursuing Congregational Ministry in Year 2



Activities of Students Serving in Congressional Ministry Internship



The Benefits of Hands-On Experience

<p>Gain or refine practical skills</p>	<p><i>“Oh my gosh, I learned so much in field ed. Yeah. I learned about putting services together. I learned about preaching. I learned about pastoral care. I learned about how to put prayers together, specifically for the liturgy. I had to write weekly prayers for service, which I hadn’t done before ... picking the liturgy, picking the hymns, putting all that together, I hadn’t seen that side of things before, so that was good ... Yeah, just learned a lot from field ed.”</i></p> <p><i>“So, I learned a lot about my pastoral presence, what that looks like. I learned a lot about my pastoral beliefs. What it looks like to minister, to care, to grieve with kind of the full spectrum of things.”</i></p> <p><i>“I learned so much ... I learned trauma-informed care. I learned about ACE scores, which is physical and mental health that can happen from abuse. I learned conversational skills, how to walk into a room and ask people about the worst day of their life and not be freaked out. I learned coping mechanisms to help with my anxiety. I learned a ton about myself and how I respond to things ... And by the end of it, I was exhausted, but I did learn a lot.”</i></p>
<p>Build confidence and self-efficacy</p>	<p><i>“I had a great field ed experience this last summer ... I think I’ll probably stick with the word confidence ... I was encouraged by people in the congregation who were edified by the work I was putting it in ... and competence, that I could actually do this ... I can make a difference. I enjoy it. Those are just huge affirmations for me.”</i></p> <p><i>“I think the field placement was encouraging, made you feel like you were actually prepared to do the work that you are entering into.”</i></p> <p><i>“I have felt affirmed by my mentors, by the supervisors of my field placement, and by the laity. In being able to lead, whether it’s virtual or in person, it has been helpful in knowing that I have the gifts to do such, and that I enjoy it.”</i></p>
<p>Role experimentation and career discernment</p>	<p><i>“I think field ed has been super fruitful. Just getting experience and realizing where my gifts are, where I feel really called to or not called to ... Over the summer, I did a pastoral internship at a church. And so, I preached a couple times. I really liked preaching. I really have never felt too called to be a pastor or to lead a church. So, I’m kind of slowly just testing things out and marking them off my lists. And hopefully, I’ll whittle it down to something. I’m like, “Oh, wow, like this is life-giving. And I can see myself doing this and not the other things, at least.”</i></p> <p><i>“It made me not want to be a pastor because I couldn’t handle all the Zoom one-on-one meetings. And then I was like, “I don’t know if I’m cut out for this.” Which might still be true ... Yeah. So, I think in that way, I was like, “Okay, maybe not this right now.” And I think that’s what made me gravitate more towards I want to be involved in the church but also like these other things. So, like my whole life won’t be just giving pastoral care to adults in this community.”</i></p> <p><i>“I love chaplaincy ... And it’s really funny to me because I could never really define the calling that I felt. I kept saying, “I’m called to pastor in a different way.” And I never knew what that different way was until I started in chaplaincy. I do like the pastoral care portion of being a pastor, but I don’t like having to prepare a sermon every Sunday, having to do the exegetical work and all of those things that come with it. If I was somewhere where I could just do pastoral care, I would love that ... But I don’t see myself staying on within a church ministry for long. But I do see myself doing chaplaincy for life.”</i></p> <p><i>“... field education placement last summer, I specifically asked not to be placed in a church because like I told you, I thought, you know, no, no church ministry. So instead, I specifically asked [to be placed in a non-profit] ... I think what I took away from that experience was that while I loved working with the youth and the kids there, which I knew I would ... I couldn’t figure out like career-wise or vocationally, where I would fit in that type of setting. And that really was a sort of deciding factor for me in my decision not to apply for the dual degree program, because I was like, I just, I don’t know if I can picture myself not in a church setting. So, it was like a complete 180, you know?”</i></p>

This underlines, once again, the critical importance of student placements. Assigning students to internships with thoughtful supervisors who mentor and form significant bonds with them and effectively delegate enough meaningful work is vital for maximizing the benefits of field education. Failing to do this can not only lead to a sense of disappointment and negative

overall evaluations of field education experiences, but, more importantly, alter students' trajectories. The longer-term impacts of field education experiences are something we will continue to attend to as we follow students through the program into the early years of their careers.

Practical Implications

Taken together, what do these data suggest about field education? Overall, we found that students see field education as an important complement to their classroom experiences. It is regarded as a chance to put learning into practice and build the practical skills and confidence needed to become competent and successful religious leaders. We also found that students perceived their internships as one of the most important means through which to discern their calling and/or to decide among multiple vocational paths.

Our data show that most students have positive field education experiences. Our research also suggests that positive and impactful experiences are linked to two key aspects of the field education experience: relationships and hands-on experience. On the one hand, opportunities to do meaningful work and try out different roles and tasks facilitate career preparation and discernment. On the other hand, the relationships students form, especially with supervisors but also with community members and their peers, also play an important role. These are spaces for students to discuss and interpret their experiences, dig deeper into their strengths and weaknesses, and gain a more realistic understanding of the realities of religious leadership.

Overall, this suggests that it is wise to continue to invest significant resources in field education. Field education placements are critical for vocational discernment and for students to practice the skills needed for ministry. Given that the student-supervisor relationship plays such a large role in shaping students' experiences, it

is important to invest time and resources identifying, training, and supporting quality supervisors and mentoring relationships.

It may be worth considering developing a curriculum that helps students learn skills to navigate and manage ideological differences, given the reality and potential negative impact of ideological differences between students (and pastors) and the congregations they serve. Preliminary data from the National Study of Religious Leaders show that (Mainline) clergy tend to be more politically and theologically liberal than their congregations. Others have noted that this ideological disparity is associated with lower job satisfaction among clergy. We expect that this divide will continue or grow as current students enter ministry. Field education is an ideal time to help students consider general approaches and build practical skills related to managing these differences in ways that can promote flourishing for both pastors and the communities they serve.

To conclude, our study validates the excellent work the Divinity School is doing supporting field education. Continued investments in field education are likely to pay major dividends in developing the leadership capacities of seminarians.



The Seminary to Early Ministry Study