

EXCERPT: Values that Matter:
Differentiating Catholic Colleges and Universities
through Comparative Alumni Research

In the summer of 2006, the National Catholic College Admission Association (NCCAA) commissioned Hardwick~Day to conduct an alumni survey of Catholic college and university graduates from the years 1970 to 1999 and to provide analysis of those results with comparison to responses of alumni who graduated from other types of institutions, especially public flagship universities.

The following brief highlights are based upon responses from 2,063 alumni representing 308 NCCAA colleges and universities, 611 from other church-affiliated private institutions, 614 non-church affiliated private institutions, and 530 alumni of flagship public universities (designated as “national universities” in *U.S. News and World Report, America’s Best Colleges, 1999*). The full report may be obtained by contacting Brian Lynch, Executive Director of the National Catholic College Admission Association, at lynch@nationalccaa.org.

Introduction

Private colleges and universities must justify their higher tuition while competing against highly visible, tax-subsidized universities offering artificially low tuition. It is critically important for private colleges to know whether the reported experiences of alumni support the colleges’ claims of academic value, the value of their respective missions, and how the student experience compares with other types of institutions. Further, in this era of accountability and assessment, it is important to understand avenues for improvement and to be able to document the extent to which institutions realize their unique missions.

Look, for example, at the US News and World Report rankings and examine reported student-faculty ratios. One might conclude that big public universities are strikingly similar to smaller private colleges, offering strong undergraduate programs much less expensively than their private counterparts. However, few *graduates* of national public universities report an educational experience reflecting low student-faculty ratios.

And so this research serves to differentiate private colleges and universities from public institutions generally, and NCCAA colleges and universities specifically, on the basis of those factors that scholars have found to be most relevant to educational success. Higher education researchers have established that active learning—engagement and involvement between students and professors, between students themselves, between students and dynamic academic and co-curricular programs—is the chief source of educational success and college satisfaction.

The comparative alumni study used in this research was designed to test the findings Dr. Alexander Astin reported in his book, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*. (Astin, 1997).

Findings: The Classroom Experience

NCCAA member graduates were far more likely to report benefiting from high quality, teaching-oriented faculty, from actual professors as opposed to graduate student teaching assistants, professors who challenged them and helped them meet the challenge, and from interaction through classroom discussions. NCCAA classrooms are simply far more engaging venues for effective learning.

Classroom Environment Variables by Institution Type								
	Please tell me how much you personally benefited from your college offering... (Percentage rating "benefited very much")				How often did your college experience include the following... (Percentage rating 4 or 5 on a five-point scale: 1 = never, 5 = always)			
	Classes with fewer than 20 students	Majority of classes taught by professors	High quality, teaching-oriented faculty	A safe campus environment	Teaching assistants often used in class?	Professors often challenged students, but personally helped them meet the challenge?	Extensive classroom discussions	Informal student study groups?
NCCAA Institutions	52%	81%	56%	59%	7%	77%	74%	41%
National Flagship Public Universities	13%	38%	27%	31%	25%	47%	48%	28%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	60%	89%	58%	65%	6%	79%	70%	33%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	64%	86%	68%	54%	7%	77%	72%	36%

Community, Extracurricular Activities, and Faith

Beyond teaching and learning—and critically important to adolescents looking at colleges—classrooms were more frequently seen as good places to make friends. Graduates reported a strong sense of community.

Across the spectrum of participation, NCCAA graduates also reported more frequent involvement in international and off-campus study, campus publications and government, and volunteer and service work.

Not surprisingly, NCCAA respondents reported learning more about their faith during their college years than their flagship peers and that college helped them integrate faith with other aspects of their lives more than their flagship peers.

Reported Opportunities for Spiritual Development by Institution Type		
	How much do you agree or disagree with the following? (percentage responding 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	
	I learned more about faith during my college years.	College helped me integrate faith with other aspects of life.
NCCAA Colleges and Universities	49%	57%
National Flagship Public Universities	16%	12%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	60%	60%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	27%	25%

Even more compelling is their expression of the importance that moral considerations play in their everyday lives that cements the difference between NCCAA institutions and public flagship universities in a way that would be relevant to any student of any faith. Graduates of NCCAA institutions reported stronger personal values on every indicator that was measured for this study in comparison to their flagship public university peers. This should not be surprising, since NCCAA respondents also reported higher instances of values and morals being integrated in to the classroom, and NCCAA respondents reported that college was a time for spiritual development for them.

You Get What You Pay For

There were very few differences in means of paying for college between NCCAA respondents and public flagship respondents. Both types of respondents reported about the same levels of working during the year and being responsible for paying for their own education. While NCCAA respondents were more likely to report having received a scholarship or grant to attend college, they are almost twice as likely to report having to take out loans to attend college. This is a cause for concern but when asked the follow up question, “Were the loans a good investment on your part?” 96% said “yes”. NCCAA graduates were nearly twice as likely to say they graduated in 4 years, which means at least one less year of college costs.

Preparation for Career and Life

In the end, students go to college, and parents send them, in order that the student might achieve a better or more prosperous life. NCCAA graduates certainly credit the college for this, and these outcomes cover a broad range from the practical to the moral and to community and church involvement.

Alumni Outcomes by Institution Type								
How effective was your college in helping you develop.... (percentage responding 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale: 1 = not at all effective and 5 = extremely effective)								
	Preparation for your first job?	Speaking effectively	Writing effectively	Solving problems and effective decision making	Leadership	Being politically or socially aware	Moral principals that can guide actions	Sense of purpose in life
NCCAA Colleges and Univ.	70%	72%	80%	81%	70%	67%	80%	73%
National Flagship Public Univ.	62%	55%	62%	73%	52%	48%	35%	57%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Insts.	65%	67%	75%	80%	65%	58%	79%	79%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Insts.	64%	67%	81%	82%	62%	63%	56%	65%

The findings of this research paint a high contrast picture of a wide range of relevant differences between NCCAA institutions and their public sector competitors, which should be important not only to Catholic families but to families seeking an effective education in a setting where strength of personal and civic character are educational outcomes.