

Values that Matter: Differentiating Catholic Colleges and Universities through Comparative Alumni Research¹

James Day, M.A.

In summer 2006, the National Catholic College Admission Association (NCCAA) commissioned the firm of 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. This article presents a few of the key findings in areas related to classroom environment and cocurricular activities, as well as conclusions concerning values, outcomes, and educational financing.

Introduction

Private colleges and universities must justify their higher tuition while competing against highly visible, tax-subsidized universities offering artificially low tuition. Consequently, for competitive reasons, it is critically important to know whether the reported experiences of alumni support the claims of private colleges regarding academic value, respective missions, and student life. Furthermore, 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 U.S. News and World Reports' America's Best Colleges rankings and examine reported student-faculty ratios or

James Day, M.A., is the President of Hardwick-Day, Inc., Bloomington, MN.

¹ The National Catholic College Admissions Association will be initiating the first steps of the "Values that Matter" Campaign; this campaign includes contact with enrollment managers, marketing and alumni professionals at Catholic colleges and universities. A full report of the research can be obtained by contacting Brian Lynch, Executive Director of the National Catholic College Admission Association at (312) 321-2726 or via email at: lynch@nationalccaa.org.

the percentage of classes below 20 students. 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, the findings of this research tell another story. Few graduates from national public universities report an educational experience reflecting a 12:1 student-faculty ratio or smaller classes.

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. Further, these findings indicate a measure of success relative to mission, while also providing an important understanding of how graduates assess their own outcomes, once they are established in their careers. The questions related to financing education show how they paid for and value their student experience.

Questions were asked of all respondents, regardless of institution type. While this paper focuses on comparisons between NCCAA colleges and universities and flagship public universities specifically, data is also presented for two other types of institutions encountered during interviewing: other Church-affiliated private colleges and universities and non-Church-affiliated private colleges and universities. The data for these institutions are presented but minimally analyzed in this paper. Comparisons are made primarily between NCCAA colleges and universities and national flagship universities.

Higher education researchers have established that active learning—engagement and involvement between students and professors, between students themselves, between students and dynamic academic and cocurricular 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*.² Using data from UCLA's national survey of American freshmen, follow-up surveys, and other data on those students, Astin's research emphasized the importance of the climate created by the interaction of faculty with students and between students, rather than the type of college or its facilities, in producing positive educational outcomes.

² Astin, Alexander W. 1997. *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*. Hoboken: Jossey-Bass.

The Comparative Alumni Research conducted by Hardwick-Day asks alumni to reflect on aspects of engagement and interaction in their college experience. Analysis of the data from this study and many others validate the premise that student engagement is what matters educationally and documents the extent to which this engagement was present, significant, and beneficial to the student experience of graduates of several types of institutions.

Methodology

Hardwick-Day began the Comparative Alumni Research project in 1998 and collected data from college graduates via telephone surveys in 2006, 2003, 2002, 2001, 1999, and 1998. Alumni names were obtained from both college and commercial sources. The database of responses in the 1970-2001 timeframe now numbers more than 5,000 respondents. The database has been backtested to verify that alumni perceptions do not migrate over time. As a result, a 1975 graduate perceives his student experience in the same way whether interviewed in 1998 or 2006.

In Fall 2006, the NCCAA commissioned Hardwick-Day to contact Catholic college alumni who graduated no later than 1999; these respondents ranged from those who graduated in 1970 through 1999. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences with the undergraduate Catholic college that they attended. The sample sizes are broken out in Table 1 by institution type.

The institutions represented in this study include a wide range of characteristics. For example, high selectivity, as measured by U.S.

Table 1. Respondents, Response Rate, and Institutions by Institution Type

Institution Type	Respondents	Number of Institutions Represented in this Study
NCCAA Colleges and Universities	308	110
Flagship Public Universities	530	147*
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	611	178
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	614	170

* Flagship public universities = Public universities designated as "national universities" in *U.S. News and World Report, America's Best Colleges, 1999*.

