

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

by
James Day
President, Hardwick-Day, Inc.

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.

This article presents a few of the key findings in areas related to classroom environment and co-curricular activities, as well as findings relating to 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, it is critically important for private colleges to know whether the reported experiences of alumni support their claims of academic value, the value of their respective missions, and how the student experience compares with other types of institutions for competitive reasons. 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. Finally, this message must be communicated to the institutions' stakeholders.

Look, for example, at the US News and World Report rankings and examine reported student-faculty ratios or 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. The findings of this research tell another story. Few of those graduates from national public universities report an educational experience reflecting a 12:1 student-faculty ratio or smaller classes.

And so this research serves to differentiate private colleges and universities from public institutions generally, and Catholic Colleges and Universities specifically, on the basis of those factors that scholars have found to be most relevant to educational success. Further, these findings offer a measure of success relative to mission, while also providing an important understanding of how graduates assess their own outcomes now that they are established in their careers. The questions related to financing education show how they paid for and value their student experience.

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*. Using data from UCLA’s national survey of American freshmen, follow-up surveys and other data on those students, Astin’s research documented 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 (Astin, 1997).

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 validates the understanding that student engagement is what matters educationally, and documents the extent to which this engagement was present, significant, and beneficial in the student experience of graduates of several types of institutions.

Methodology

Hardwick-Day began the Comparative Alumni Research project in 1998 and has collected data from college graduates via telephone surveys conducted 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 data base has been backtested to verify that alumni perceptions do not migrate over time. That is, a 1975 graduate perceives his student experience in the same way whether interviewed in 1998 or 2006.

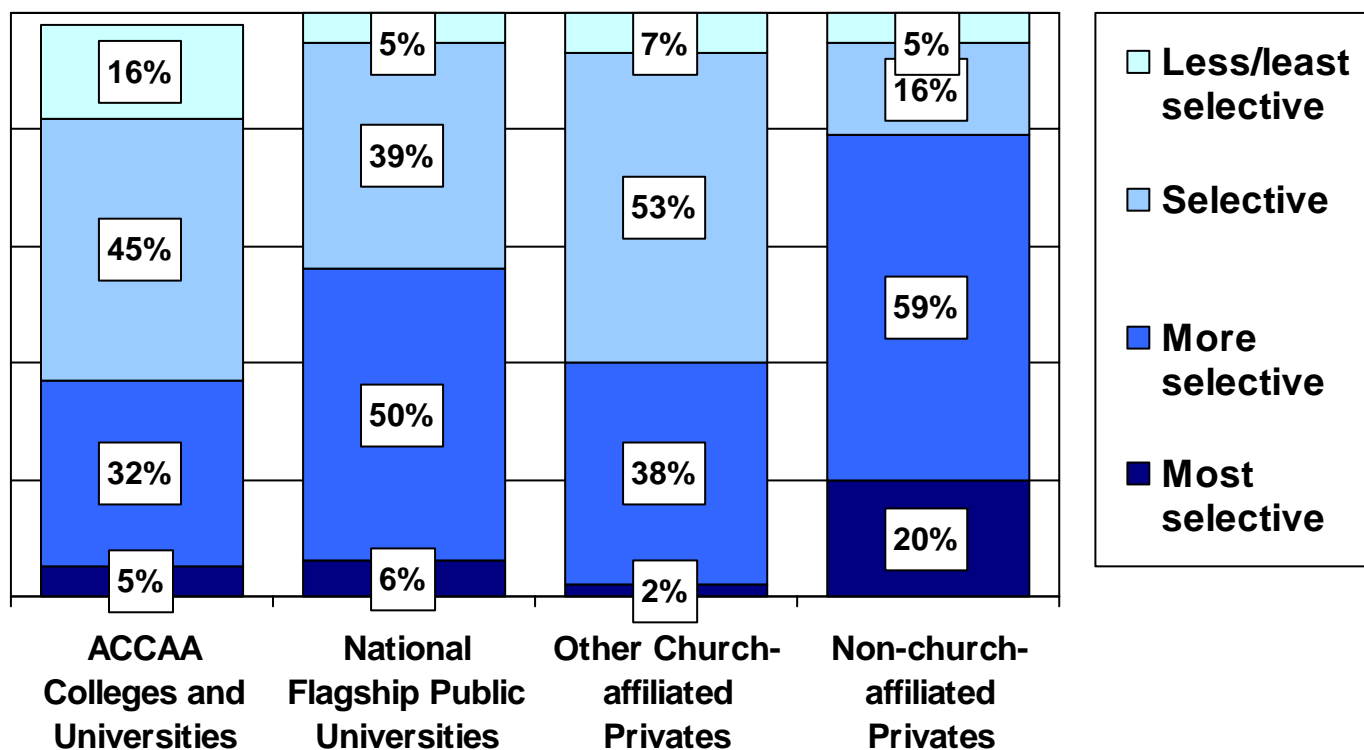
In Fall 2006 the NCCAA commissioned Hardwick-Day to contact Catholic college alumni who graduated no later than 1999; these respondents ranged from those who graduated in 1970 through those who graduated in 1999.. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences with the undergraduate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

Table One: Respondents, Response rate, and Institutions by Institution Type	
Institution Type	Respondents
CCAACU Colleges and Universities	308
Flagship Public Universities	530
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	611
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	614

*Flagship public universities = 147 public universities designated as “national universities” in *U.S. News and World Report, America’s Best Colleges, 1999*.

The institutions represented in this study cover a wide range of characteristics. For example, within each of the institution types, selectivity, as measured by U.S. News and World Report (1999), ranges from around 2% of other church affiliated private universities to one fifth of non-Church affiliated private colleges in the sample. Figure 1 shows a representation of the selectivity ratings of institutions in this study.

Figure 1: Selectivity Rating of Universities and Colleges in Comparative Alumni Study by Institution Type



Classroom Environment

In popular culture, Catholic colleges and universities are often associated with scholarship and historical research, as well as with theological issues. But Catholic higher education prides itself on undergraduate teaching and learning in liberal arts and sciences as well as in more vocational or applied fields. Experiences reported by alumni affirm this view and detail a major difference across a wide range of classroom dimensions with those experiences reported by graduates of public flagship institutions. CCAA 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. CCAA classrooms are simply far more engaging venues for effective learning.

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

	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... (rating 4 or 5 on a five-point scale)*				Would you say that most of your course grades were based on... (percentage answering "yes")
	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?	Essay exams and written reports?
ACCA Colleges and Universities	52%	81%	56%	59%	7%	77%	74%	41%	58%
National Flagship Public Universities	13%	38%	27%	31%	25%	47%	48%	28%	48%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	60%	89%	58%	65%	6%	79%	70%	33%	60%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	64%	86%	68%	54%	7%	77%	72%	36%	75%

*Five point scale: 1 = never, 5 = always.

Public institutions are widely perceived to offer more co-curricular opportunities, which is logical given their size. But there turns out to be a sizeable gap between merely offering something and creating a climate in which students actually participate.

ACCAA universities and colleges showed higher rates of participation in academically challenging co-curricular activities, such as faculty directed research or independent study and off-campus or international study. Table three provides a further breakdown of these figures.

	While in college, did you participate in... (percentage saying yes)			
	A college-sponsored internship or other applied learning?	Faculty directed research or independent study?	Off-campus or international study?	Did not participate in any co-curricular activities.
ACCA Colleges and Universities	38%	43%	35%	20%
National Flagship Public Universities	33%	35%	26%	34%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	48%	50%	43%	16%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	46%	58%	41%	14%

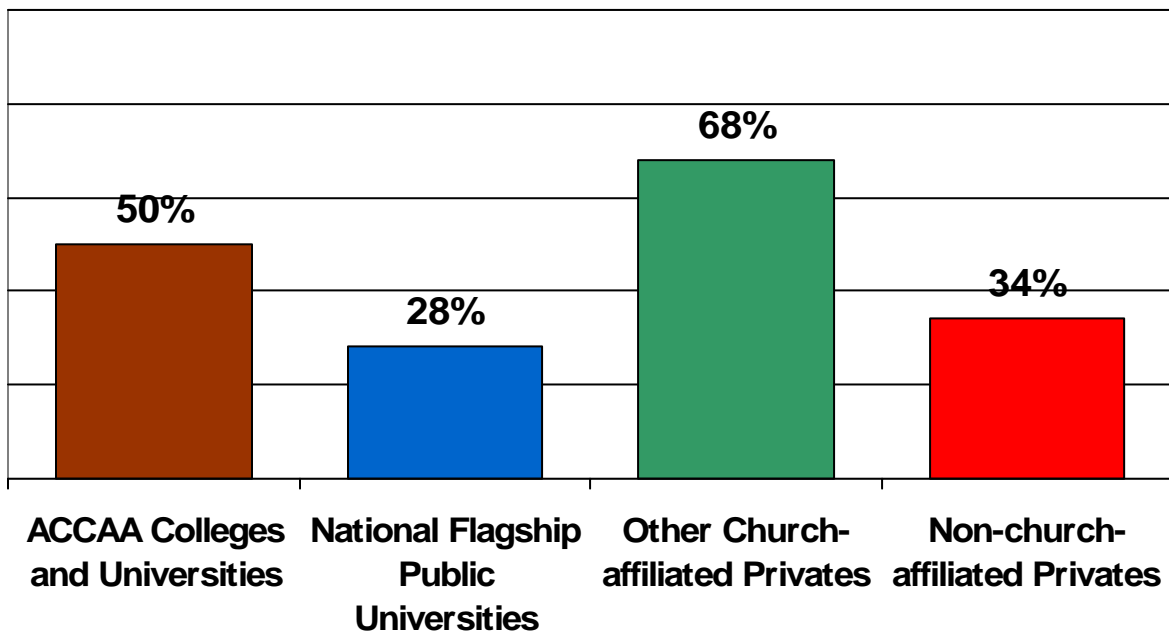
Co-curricular Activities

Across the spectrum of participation, ACCAA graduates more frequently report involvement in international and off-campus study, campus publications and government, and volunteer and service work. AACCAA graduates are also more likely to report being involved in varsity athletics and having had a leadership role in any extracurricular activities during their time at their alma mater. In fact, AACCAA graduates reported higher levels of involvement than their national flagship public university counterparts in all measures excluding involvement in fraternities and sororities. See table 4 for reported participation in co-curricular activities.

	Were you involved in any of the following... (percentage responding "yes")					Did you have any leadership roles in any extracurricular activities? (percentage responding "yes")
	Campus publications or student government?	Volunteer or community service activities?	Academic clubs and activities?	Varsity athletics?	A fraternity or sorority?	
ACCA Colleges and Universities	28%	59%	45%	16%	15%	58%
National Flagship Public Universities	12%	44%	33%	9%	20%	49%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	30%	62%	48%	21%	28%	70%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	32%	50%	43%	22%	28%	65%

Of some concern is the seemingly low percentage of ACCAA graduates who reported participating in Church or religious activities while in school—50 percent for CCAA graduates vs. 28 percent for public flagship graduates. See figure 2 for a breakdown of church or religious activities.

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents stating ‘yes’ to the question: “Were you involved in church or religious activities?” by institution type



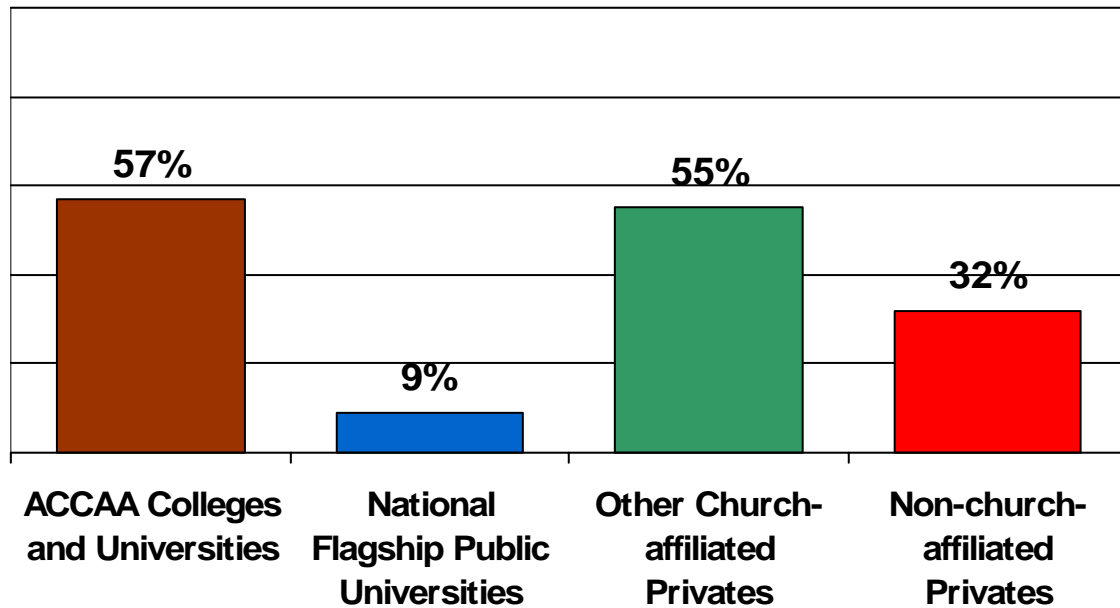
Friendships and Personal Development

Some of the most striking differences between ACCAA colleges and universities and national flagship public universities are found in the respondents’ reporting of friendships, community, and personal development while attending their alma mater. A full 82% of ACCAA institutions respondents reported agreement that there was a sense of community among students at their alma mater. Likewise, 10 percentage points more ACCAA respondents than flagship respondents reported that friendships often developed from classroom experiences (63% to 52%, respectively).

Connected with building community and friendships, the majority of ACCAA respondents (83%) reported that they had frequent interaction with students with similar values to their own while on campus, compared to just under two-thirds of flagship respondents (61%). A full ¾ of ACCAA respondents (75%) reported that there was frequent integration of values and ethics in classroom discussions, compared to just over ¼ of flagship universities (27%). This finding is represented in figure 3. Likewise, while less than 10% of flagship respondents (9%) reported that they benefited from an emphasis on personal values and ethics, more than half of the ACCAA respondents (57%) said that they did benefit from this emphasis. Finally, this personal and ethical development might be rooted in the faculty culture of the institution. While 59% of ACCAA college and university respondents reported that a professor served as a mentor or role

model in college for them, that figure drops to 43% for the public flagship schools. ACCAA respondents were about half as likely to report that no one served as a mentor or role model for them in college as compared to public flagships schools (23% to 39%, respectively).

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents saying that they “benefited very much from an emphasis on personal values and ethics” by institution type



Opportunities for Spiritual Development

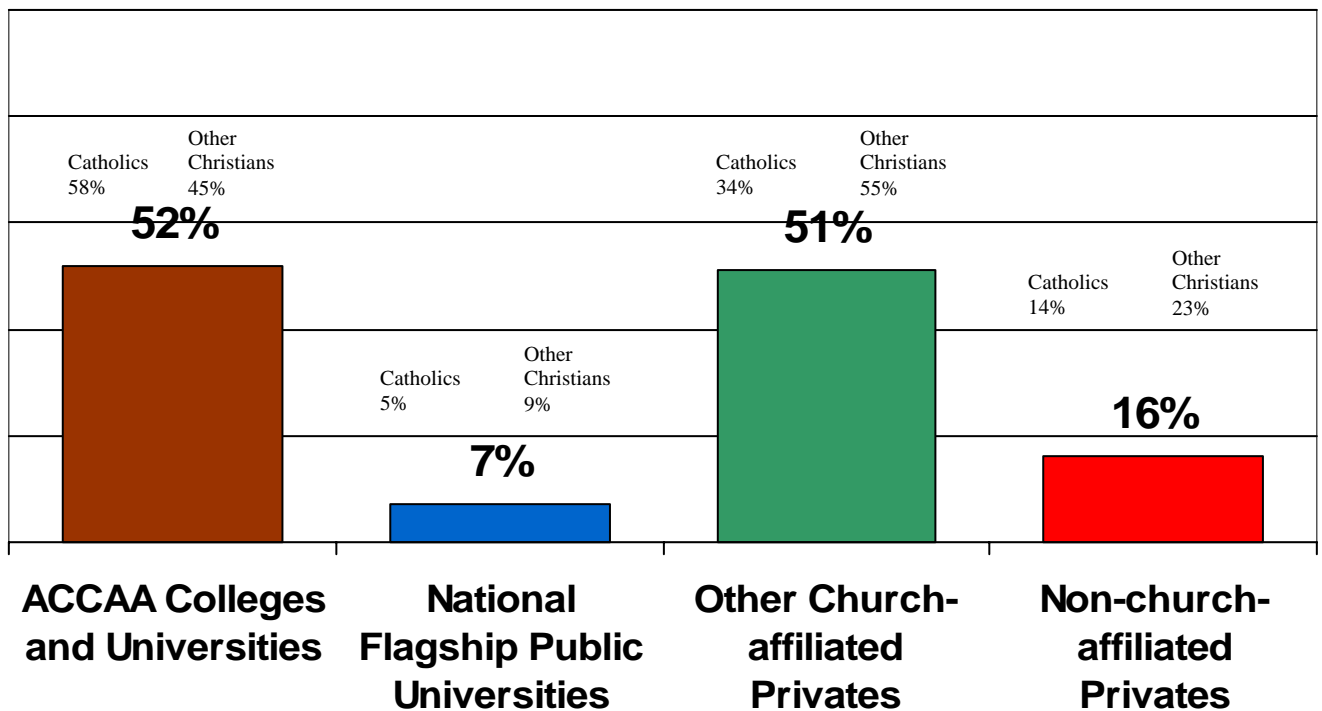
Also included in the comparisons of institution types are the reported opportunities for spiritual development while in college. Not surprisingly, ACCAA respondents reported learning more about their faith during their college years than their flagship peers (49% to 16%, respectively), and reported that college helped them integrate faith with other aspects of their lives more than their flagship peers (57% to 12%). See table 5 for a breakdown of responses by institution type.

	How much do you agree or disagree with the following? (percentage responding 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale)*	
	I learned more about faith during my college years.	College helped me integrate faith with other aspects of life.
ACCA 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%

*5 point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

An interesting caveat to the data on spiritual development while attending university is that within ACCAA schools, Catholics were more likely to report that they benefited from opportunities for spiritual development than their other Christian counterparts (58% to 45%); however, within flagship schools, Christian students not of the Catholic faith were slightly more likely to report that they benefited from opportunities for spiritual development than their Catholic peers (9% to 5%). See figure 4 for responses by institution type.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents rating that they benefited very much from opportunities for spiritual development by Catholic affiliation and institution type.



Financing Education

Means of paying for their college education saw very few differences between ACCAA respondents and public flagship respondents. Both ACCAA and public flagship respondents reported about the same levels of working during the year (72% to 70%, respectively) and being responsible for paying for their own education (50% to 47%). While ACCAA respondents were slightly more likely to report having received a scholarship or grant to attend college (54% to 45% of public flagship respondents), they are also almost twice as likely to report having to take out loans to attend college (60% to 39% of public flagship schools). This is a cause for concern: as ACCAA graduates take on increasing debt to finance their education, this creates vulnerability

for the ACCAA colleges. The vulnerability lies in the amount of debt and whether graduates feel that financial pressure denied them a lot of the benefits of a Catholic education or that the loans they took out were not worth it in the end. When asked the follow up question: “were the loans a good investment on your part?” the vast majority (96%) of ACCAA respondents said ‘yes’.

Alumni Outcomes

In the end, students go to college, and parents send them, in order that the student might achieve a better or more prosperous life. ACCAA 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.

ACCAA graduates were nearly twice as likely to say they graduated in 4 years and far more likely to credit their college with helping them develop writing skills, obtain leadership experience, relate to people of different backgrounds, develop a sense of purpose in life, and develop moral principals that can guide actions. See table 7 for more detailed information on these alumni outcomes. Seventy-nine percent of ACCAA graduates report being members of a Church. Likewise, ACCAA graduates report higher involvement with their alma mater, and higher levels of involvement with church or religious organizations than their flagship university peers. See table 6 for a breakout of involvement of alumni by institution type.

Table 6: Alumni Involvement by Institution Type						
	In the past five years, have you been involved in volunteer activity with the following...?					Are you currently a member of an organized church? (percentage responding ‘yes’)
	Church or religious organization.	Elementary or secondary school.	Foundations and non-profit organizations.	Community Service	Your undergraduate college or university.	
ACCA Colleges and Universities	73%	57%	75%	54%	43%	79%
National Flagship Public Universities	61%	51%	68%	49%	27%	62%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	84%	60%	73%	57%	47%	81%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	59%	52%	78%	60%	50%	59%

Table 7: Alumni Outcomes by Institution Type												
	How effective was your college in helping you develop.... (percentage responding 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale)*											Percentage responding that they consider themselves better prepared than students from other colleges.
	Preparation for your first job?	Preparation for career change or advancement?	Speaking effectively?	Writing effectively?	Solving problems and effective decision making?	Leadership?	Relating to people of different backgrounds?	Being politically or socially aware?	Fine arts appreciation	Moral principals that can guide actions?	A sense of purpose in life?	
ACCA Colleges and Universities	70%	59%	72%	80%	81%	70%	68%	67%	58%	80%	73%	47%
National Flagship Public Universities	62%	55%	55%	62%	73%	52%	60%	48%	45%	35%	57%	34%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	65%	51%	67%	75%	80%	65%	67%	58%	70%	79%	79%	40%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	64%	63%	67%	81%	82%	62%	70%	63%	66%	56%	65%	53%

*5 point scale where 1 = not at all effective and 5 = extremely effective

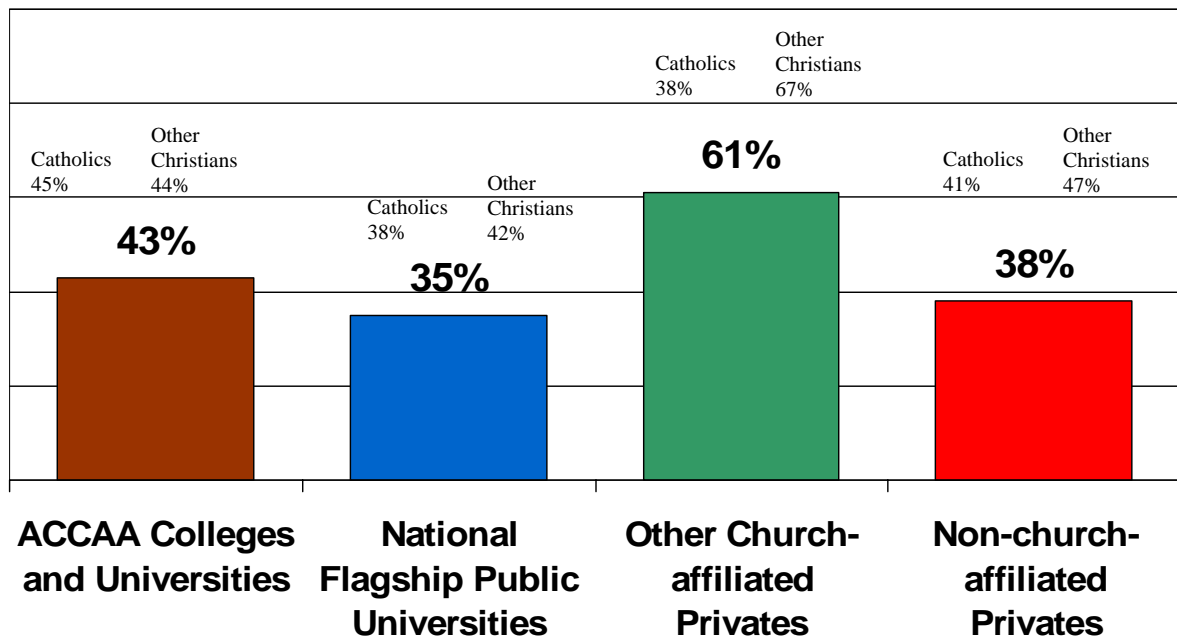
Even more compelling is their expression of the importance that moral considerations play in their everyday lives that cements the difference between ACCAA institutions and public flagship universities in a way that would be relevant to any student of any faith. Graduates of ACCAA institutions reported 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 ACCAA respondents also reported higher instances of values and morals being integrated in to the classroom, and ACCAA respondents reported that college was a time for spiritual development for them. See table 8 for a detailed break-out of responses by institution type.

	How important is it for you to... (percentage responding 5 on a 5 point scale)*				
	Use your best skills and abilities?	Be free to consider the moral and ethical side of decisions?	Raise a family?	Promote racial equality or social justice issues?	Contribute to the community?
ACCA Colleges and Universities	78%	65%	70%	45%	43%
National Flagship Public Universities	65%	55%	66%	33%	36%
Other Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	73%	69%	76%	39%	41%
Non-Church-Affiliated Private Colleges and Universities	74%	64%	67%	42%	44%

*5 point scale where 1 = not at all important and 5 = extremely important.

One finding of particular interest is that while ACCAA institution alumni reported that they found it extremely important to integrate faith or spirituality in their lives at higher rates than their national flagship public institutions (43% to 35% respectively), within ACCAA institutions, Catholics and other Christians reported this extreme importance at about the same rate. This suggests that ACCAA institutions serve an evangelical role to their non-Catholic students, encouraging them to incorporate faith into their daily lives. The same finding holds true for national flagship public universities – Catholics and other Christians report the importance of faith integration in everyday life at about the same rates, but both groups report this importance at lower rates than their ACCAA counterparts, regardless of religious affiliation. Figure 5 shows the response percentages for faith integration by institution and within institution by religious affiliation.

Figure 5: Response for faith integration by institution and within institution by religious affiliation.



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.

It is the NCCAA’s hope that Catholic Colleges will incorporate these data into as much of their work as possible. For example, oral and print communications to internal and external audiences – prospective families, church leaders, high school guidance counselors, and the media – can be enhanced with evidence of effectiveness. Or, especially in areas that the Catholic colleges may not have performed as highly as expected, data can be used to plan strategic goals and perhaps measures of effectiveness.

Full Report and Next Steps

The National Catholic College Admission Association will be initiating the first steps of the “Values that Matter” Campaign and carrying it through the next several years. The plans for this campaign can also be obtained by contacting Brian Lynch.

Reference:

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

¹ A full report of the research can be obtained by contacting Brian Lynch, Executive Director of the National Catholic College Admission Association at lynch@nationalccaa.org.