

THE INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CIVIC VALUES

Margaret M. Ryan, Boston College

INTRODUCTION

Catholic colleges and universities stand at the confluence of three important trends in twenty-first century American higher education. First, in recent years there have been fervent and repeated calls for higher education to renew its commitment to the public good (Boyer, 1990; Campus Compact, 1999; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Wingspread Group, 1993). Second, challenged by the papal encyclical, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, to articulate the distinctiveness of their missions, Catholic colleges and universities are struggling to identify the “value added” by Catholic education. Third, the population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse; it is predicted that by the year 2050, the cohort of 18- to 24-year olds will be predominantly of color (Swail, 2002). Already the largest minority groups in the United States, both the number and percentage of Americans claiming Hispanic or Latino origins are expected to increase rapidly over the next fifty years (Swail, 2002). The majority of Latino Americans – approximately 70% according to the Pew Hispanic Center (2002) – are Catholic, thus the increasing percentage of Latinos in the U.S. population signals a shift in the ethnic or racial composition of the U.S. Catholic population. Because approximately sixty-five percent (65%) of the students attending Catholic institutions are themselves Catholic (ACCU, 2006), changes in the U.S. Catholic population are likely to have an impact on these colleges and universities. The convergence of these trends provides a timely opportunity for Catholic colleges and universities to review their institutional purpose within the context of an increasingly diverse democracy.

The literature of higher education has given considerable attention to the impact of college on student values. In recent years, research concerning Hispanic educational trends has also emerged. Missing from the higher education literature, however, is an understanding of the intersection of Hispanic educational trends and the distinct mission of Catholic higher education. This study addresses that gap in the research by establishing a framework for the discussion of Hispanic enrollments in Catholic institutions and the effectiveness of those institutions in fulfilling a significant aspect of their institutional mission, namely, to graduate men and women who are committed to service and who value involvement in their communities. As such, this study explored four general research questions: (1) Do Catholic colleges and universities foster the development of students' civic values more effectively than do public, secular or other religiously-affiliated institutions? (2) Are Catholic colleges and universities equally effective in fostering civic values among students of different racial/ethnic groups? (3) Do Hispanic students at Catholic colleges and universities express greater civic value development than Hispanic students at other types of institutions? (4) Do other characteristics of Catholic colleges and universities (such as size, selectivity, diversity, or location) affect the development of Hispanic students' civic values?

SUMMARY OF STUDY

This study was framed with Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (the “I-E-O model”), which considers input variables (I), experience variables (E), and output variables (O) (Astin, 1993). Three major data sources were used in this study: the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and longitudinal student data collected through a series of surveys designed and administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). The dataset used in this study was generated by merging longitudinal data collected in two separate surveys – the CIRP Student Information Form (SIF) and the College Student Survey (CSS) – with institutional data collected through IPEDS.

After applying various selection criteria (which limited inclusion in the study to CSS unit records that had paired SIF records generated at the same institution at least three years before, were from a 4-year institution located within the fifty states, and were in a group of at least 30 records associated with that institution), a total of 23,554 students from 142 institutions qualified for inclusion in this study. Among the institutions represented, 37 are members of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) and 55 have some religious affiliation other than Catholic (herein “other religious”). Of the remaining institutions, 35 are private, not-for-profit with no religious affiliation (herein “private, nonsectarian”) and 15 are public.

The dependent variable, commitment to civic values, was derived from a factor analysis of survey items relating to the students’ life objectives. In previous factor analyses of earlier HERI data sets, the level of importance a student assigns to various life goals have been found to have strong internal consistencies (Antonio and Astin, 2004; Astin et al, 2000; Rhee and Dey, 1996). Factor analysis of the current data confirmed the appropriateness of a factor scale in this study. Thus, the dependent variable, *commitment to civic values* ($\alpha = .837$), is a composite of the values a student assigns to each of six objectives (see Table 1).

Table 1. Survey items contributing to the Commitment to Civic Values measure

The dependent variable for this study, commitment to civic values, is a composite of the values (1 = not important; 2 = somewhat important; 3 = very important; 4 = essential) a student assigns to each of the following objectives:

	Survey Item	Factor Loading
1.	Becoming a Community Leader	.760
2.	Participating in a Community Action Program	.760
3.	Influencing the Political Structure	.756
4.	Influencing Social Values	.737
5.	Helping to Promote Racial Understanding	.727
6.	Keeping Up to Date with Politics	.717

Cronbach’s alpha (.837)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Upon entry to college, students' commitment to civic values varied among the types of institutions attended. On average, students entering Catholic institutions placed a significantly ($p < .05$) higher value on civic commitment objectives than did students entering public or other religious institutions other types of institutions. Students entering Catholic institutions placed slightly higher value on civic objectives than did students entering private, nonsectarian institutions, but this difference was not found to be significant ($p > .05$). When commitment to civic values was measured again through the CSS, students at Catholic institutions placed a significantly ($p < .05$) higher value on civic commitment objectives than did students at other types of institutions. However, the average change between the pre- and post-test scores was not found to be significantly different between any institutional types (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean Commitment to Civic Values, by institutional type

Type of Institution	N	Civic Values Pre Test		Civic Values Post Test		Difference from Pre to Post Test	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Catholic	7,037	12.91	3.58	13.52	4.03	0.61	4.01
Other Religious	5,770	12.52	3.42	13.13	3.80	0.61	3.77
Private, Nonsectarian	5,868	12.82	3.74	13.23	4.10	0.41	3.98
Public	2,946	12.18	3.74	12.78	3.91	0.60	3.89
Total	21,621	12.68	3.61	13.24	3.98	0.55	3.92

Score range: 6 to 24

Within the subset of Catholic institutions, students' commitment to civic values varied among racial groups. On average, African American students and Hispanic students placed a significantly ($p < .05$) higher value on civic commitment objectives than did the average student, while White/Caucasian students placed significantly less value on these objectives than did their peers. Asian American/Asian students' commitment to civic values did not differ significantly from the mean. These patterns held true for both the pre-test and the post test measurements and the average change between the pre- and post-test scores was not found to be significantly different between any racial groups.

A hierarchical stepwise regression analysis was performed to assess the effect of institutional type on civic value commitment when other predictive variables are controlled. Preliminary analysis suggests that when variables such as background characteristics, pre-college experiences, prior commitment to civic values, and institutional factors are controlled, attendance at a Catholic institution continues to have a significant, positive effect on students' civic value development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

Financial supporters, students, alumnae, parents, and the public are increasingly calling for accountability from higher education institutions. Leaders in Catholic higher education are struggling to respond to that call by assessing the effectiveness of their institutions in achieving their core missions. This study is significant to that effort because of its relevance to practice in higher education. It is hoped that this study will provide a meaningful basis for additional research into the future of Catholic higher education, and to the role Catholic higher education plays in the larger American society, especially as the American Catholic church undergoes changes in the population of adherents.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A.W. (1993). *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Special Report). New York: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Campus Compact (1999). *President's Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.compact.org>.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ehrlich, T. (Ed.) (2000). *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation. (2002). *2002 Survey of Latinos: Summary of Findings*. Washington, D.C.
- Swail, W.S. (2002). Higher education and the new demographics: Questions for policy. *Change*, July/August, 15-23.
- Wingspread Group on Higher Education. (1993). *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*. Racine, WI: Johnson Foundation.