

HARDWICK DAY

ENROLLMENT OPTIMIZED

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Value and Impact of the College Experience: A Comparative Alumni Study for the Annapolis Group

As our economic doldrums persist, a recurring skepticism about the value of college has been given more frequent voice by pundits, reporters, policy makers, elected officials, and even some scholars. They worry or assert that a college degree has lost its economic premium, that academic credibility has been eroded by ineffective or undemanding pedagogy, and that the cost of college is not justified.

These assertions are accompanied by a set of observations, sometimes by employment data, and most recently in the book *Academically Adrift* by data documenting serious concerns about educational effectiveness.

But, how do college graduates perceive their student experience and its value? Are there differences in the experiences graduates report that would provide evidence of what practices and experiences are most educationally effective, and where these are most likely to be woven into the fabric of the student experience? This study of how alumni of several different types of colleges and universities perceived both the nature of their experience and its benefits after testing that experience in the market for several years after graduation offers the alumni view.

Designed in conjunction with leading higher education scholars, vetted through academic conferences, and building upon a large and growing data base of thousands of survey interviews available to scholars, this survey of alumni tests the research-based findings of Alexander Astin, Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terrenzini and others that educational effectiveness is the product of student engagement with faculty, peers, programs, and student life.

The study findings ultimately address three of the big questions in the current discussion about higher education: Is it worth the cost? Does residential learning matter now that the internet seems to be making online courses and for-profit education viable models for college learning? And, with the economy a mess, does a college degree really make a difference in the job hunt?

In all three cases, this study shows that alumni generally, but especially alumni of smaller, private, residential liberal arts colleges, offer a strong and demonstrable "yes." On measure after measure—from the quality of the learning experience to the nature of their engagement with faculty and peers, from the impact on intellectual and personal development to the value to their careers—alumni of private liberal arts colleges, where the residential experience is a core dimension, say that they benefitted dramatically personally and professionally, academically and socially from their college experience. They report this in far greater numbers and percentages than do alumni of large state universities, including the top public universities.

Because these data add the reported experiences and assessment of more recent graduates to those of older alumni, we are able to report changes in the experiences reported by earlier and more recent alumni. A telling result is that pursuit of improved and intensified levels of engagement is uniform, evidence of a common understanding about the sources of educational effectiveness. Alumni from all institutional groups portrayed here reported improvements from earlier years on many of our measures. Yet in most cases, the levels of engagement and benefit reported by Annapolis Group alumni improved the most, widening the “engagement gap.”

The study is marked evidence that alumni of private liberal arts colleges believe that the education is worth the cost, that the residential experience makes a significant difference. They credited their college in helping them obtain their first job, and later career opportunities, in higher percentages than alumni of larger, public institutions.

Background

Earlier student-focused research by Alexander Astin and others has found that student involvement in and out of the classroom leads to a more effective undergraduate education and greater student satisfaction. Interaction between faculty and students, a strong community, peer interactions both inside and outside the classroom, and a challenging, active classroom environment all contribute to positive student outcomes.

It is important to note that quantitative analysis of the survey findings substantiates and validates this research. Students who experienced such engagement reported greater benefit and satisfaction and generally better learning and life outcomes than those who did not experience high levels of engagement—regardless of type of institution attended. The analysis also documents that it is the private residential liberal arts college that far more frequently engages students in these ways.

This study compares the responses of college graduates who earned degrees from one of four groupings of four-year colleges and universities: the Annapolis group of private, residential liberal arts colleges, private universities, the top 50 public flagship universities (USNWR), and public flagship universities nationally.

Some Findings

Annapolis Group alumni were far more likely to have lived on campus during college. They reported greater benefit from this experience and were far more likely to say that there was a sense of community on campus and that they benefitted from that.

They reported far greater levels of interaction with professors and correspondingly higher levels of benefit from these and other aspects of the academic experience:

- high quality, teaching-oriented faculty
- a majority of classes taught by professors, not graduate teaching assistants
- many small classes with fewer than 20 students
- professors who challenged them, and personally helped them meet those challenges

They more often reported that they worked directly with professors on independent study or faculty-directed research and had conversations with professors outside of class.

Annapolis Group alumni were also significantly more likely than any other group to say they found a mentor or role model while in college—most frequently a professor.

They also more frequently reported benefit from academic rigor. Most of these graduates' grades were based on essay examinations and written reports, as opposed to the short answer and multiple choice examinations reported more frequently by public sector alumni. Their experience entailed far fewer lecture-based classes and often included extensive classroom discussions.

Annapolis Group alumni reported more involvement in co-curricular experiences (e.g., community service) and extracurricular activities.

As a result of more frequent involvement across these dimensions of their college experience, Annapolis Group graduates report outcomes that differ significantly from those of most of their peers:

- They are more likely than any other group to have graduated in four years or less, giving them a head start on their careers.
- They give higher overall satisfaction ratings than any other alumni group, and are more likely to rate their overall undergraduate experience as "excellent."
- Annapolis Group alumni credit their undergraduate experience in helping them develop a broad range of skills important to their everyday lives (problem solving, making effective decisions, thinking analytically, writing effectively, speaking effectively, working as part of a team, and leadership skills).
- They rate the Annapolis Group colleges as highly effective in helping them obtain their first job and/or gain admission to graduate school, and report that their education continues to help them with career changes or advancement. They also more frequently credit the overall quality and breadth of their academic preparation. They believe they are better prepared than graduates of other institutions they've encountered since college.

This comparative alumni research suggest that while legitimate concerns about the value and role of college in American life may persist, these concerns are not generally reflective of the way in which relatively recent college graduates themselves assess their college experience—and this is especially and significantly truer for graduates of Annapolis Group colleges because their college experience was more frequently characterized by the kinds of engagement known to be educationally effective.