



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 28 | Issue 2

Article 5

2025

More Than Money: Holistic Outcomes of Catholic Higher Education

Jason King

St. Mary's University (TX)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Holistic Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

King, J. (2025). More than money: Holistic outcomes of Catholic higher education. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 28(2), 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2802052025>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

More Than Money: Holistic Outcomes of Catholic Higher Education

*Jason King*¹

Abstract: In an era dominated by financial metrics and return-on-investment rhetoric, this study offers a counternarrative by examining the holistic outcomes of Catholic higher education. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 2,000 college graduates, it compares alumni of Catholic and secular institutions across three domains: life satisfaction and personal fulfillment; civic engagement and community involvement; and ethical development. The findings reveal that graduates of Catholic colleges report higher life satisfaction, greater civic participation, and a stronger ethical orientation than their secular peers—patterns that persist across demographic subgroups. While Catholic colleges perform well on traditional financial indicators, their distinctive value lies in forming graduates equipped for meaningful lives shaped by purpose, compassion, and moral responsibility. These results underscore the formative power of Catholic education and provide empirical grounding for reframing public discourse on the value of college. Catholic institutions, the study concludes, offer not just credentials but formation of character and conscience.

Keywords: Catholic higher education, holistic outcomes, life satisfaction, civic engagement, ethical development, educational value

There is a growing cultural narrative that measures the value of higher education primarily in economic terms. As college costs rise and student debt climbs, families are asking a fair question: Is college worth it? Headlines now regularly highlight the costs of tuition topping \$80,000 or even \$100,000 per year (Bauman, 2025; Whitford, 2025), while national student debt hovers around \$1.7 trillion (Education Data Initiative, 2025). In this environment, it is no

¹ Saint Mary's University, Texas

surprise that media stories and policy conversations often frame the value of higher education through a cost-benefit lens: Does a degree lead to a high-paying job?

Colleges themselves, facing real financial and demographic pressures ([Grawe, 2018](#)), have increasingly leaned into this framing. With enrollments declining and competition for students intensifying, institutions feel the need to justify their worth in concrete, measurable terms. Emphasizing career outcomes and financial returns has become one of the most effective ways to appeal to prospective students and families. It is a message that fits the dominant cultural expectations: college as a pathway to personal financial security ([The Daily, 2023](#); [The Economist, 2023](#); [Tough, 2023](#)).

But reducing education to a financial transaction comes at a cost. It flattens the purpose of higher learning and sidelines deeper questions: What kind of life is worth pursuing? What kind of person are we forming? What kind of society are we building? These questions have always been central to Catholic higher education, which stands on a fundamentally different foundation. Catholic colleges and universities share the conviction that human dignity is not defined by income and that education must cultivate more than economic utility. It must help students grow in freedom, solidarity, and responsibility.

Catholic higher education has not measured its success by earnings or prestige. From their founding, Catholic colleges and universities were created to serve communities often excluded from elite institutions—immigrants, the working class, and others on the margins. As early as the 1860s, many adopted the “Saint Louis Plan,” which paired a four-year academic curriculum with career-oriented training. These schools never dismissed the importance of jobs or financial stability. They understood that education was a pathway to opportunity and that opportunity mattered, especially for those historically denied it. But they also insisted that education must do more than prepare students for the labor market. It must help them live meaningful, morally grounded lives ([King, 2015](#)).

That conviction is rooted in the Catholic faith itself and articulated through Catholic Social Teaching, which calls for the protection of human dignity, the pursuit of the common good, and a preferential option for the poor. Jesus does not promise individual acclaim or material wealth. He offers a different kind of fulfillment—“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, *New American Bible*)—defined not by possessions but by love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–39). Catholic education aims to form people who take that call seriously: people who care for the hungry, the homeless, the stranger; who value honesty, integrity, and community; and who seek not only personal fulfillment but the flourishing of others. This vision has animated Catholic higher education for generations, and it continues to draw students, parents, and educators who believe that college should be about more than credentials. It should be about calling, purpose, and the common good.

Importantly, Catholic higher education performs well by standard financial metrics. According to [IPEDS data \(NCES, 2024\)](#) data, four-year graduation rates at Catholic colleges (51.4%) are higher than the national average (49.1%) and notably higher than those at public institutions (45.3%). Nearly all full-time, first-time students (97%) receive some form of financial aid. Long-term return on investment is also strong: Graduates of Catholic colleges—represented by member institutions of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) that were part of [Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce’s *Ranking of 4,500 Colleges by ROI* \(2022\)](#)—outperform national averages in 15-, 20-, 30-, and 40-year net present value, exceeding both private nonprofit and public college benchmarks. At the 30-year mark, ACCU graduates show an average Net Present Value of \$852,500 compared to \$727,000 for private nonprofit graduates and \$694,000 for public ones.¹ By these measures, Catholic colleges are more than holding their own.

Yet if Catholic institutions focus only on these outcomes, they risk undermining their mission. The value of Catholic higher education cannot be fully captured by earnings data. Its aim is not simply to produce employable graduates but to form people capable of living meaningful lives, ones shaped by justice, compassion, and faith. When colleges reduce themselves to job training centers, they undermine their mission, reducing students to worker drones instead of treating them as full human beings called to a life of love.

While previous research has shed important light on the influence of Christian and Catholic higher education, it stops short of offering the kind of direct, comparative assessment presented here. Studies such as [Sokol and Marle’s *Civic and Faith Life in College* \(2019\)](#) and the Pew Research Center’s reports on religion and wellbeing ([Pew Research Center, 2019, 2024b](#)) focus primarily on individual religiosity rather than the institutional context that may shape such outcomes. Schreiner’s article [College Student Thriving \(2024\)](#) offers valuable insights into student thriving but limits the scope to current students at Christian colleges rather than post-graduate trajectories. [Vogelgesang and Astin’s *Post College Civic Engagement among Graduates* \(2005\)](#) contributes longitudinal data on civic engagement, yet their dataset is limited to 1998 graduates and lacks generational breadth. Similarly, the Lumen Christi and Baylor report on [Virtue Formation in Secular and Faith Based Higher Education \(Cockle et al., 2024\)](#) highlights faith-based impact at secular institutions, but examines only centers, not whole colleges. Together, these studies point toward the importance of values, engagement, and meaning, but none directly tests whether Catholic higher education as a whole delivers distinctive holistic outcomes for its graduates.

This article addresses that gap. Drawing on a nationally representative sample and controlling for key demographic factors, it compares graduates of Catholic and secular colleges across multiple

¹ Net Present Value is a way to estimate the long-term financial return of a college degree, adjusted for the time value of money. In other words, it estimates how much future earnings are worth in today’s dollars.

outcomes. By examining graduate experiences at both Catholic and non-religious institutions, the study investigates whether Catholic colleges offer distinctive benefits that extend beyond financial return. Grounded in Catholic Social Teaching and a holistic understanding of human flourishing, it evaluates three dimensions—life satisfaction, community engagement, and ethical decision making—as indicators of broader impact. The central question is whether Catholic higher education provides holistic benefits that distinguish it from secular alternatives. The results contribute to ongoing debates about the purpose of higher education and offer guidance for Catholic educators and institutional leaders seeking to align mission with practice in an era of increasing external pressures. Our hope is to reframe the conversation about the true value of a college education. In doing so, it reaffirms that the value of Catholic higher education lies not only in what students earn but in who they become.

Methodology

Study Design and Sample

To explore these holistic outcomes, we conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,000 college graduates—1,000 alumni of Catholic colleges and universities and 1,000 alumni of secular (non-religiously affiliated) institutions. The sample was provided by the survey research firm YouGov and was carefully weighted to reflect the national demographics of U.S. college graduates, ensuring a robust and reliable dataset ([YouGov, 2024](#)).

YouGov began by identifying adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, screening respondents to confirm whether they had graduated from a Catholic or secular institution. Respondents who indicated their alma mater had a religious affiliation were asked to specify the denomination. Those who selected "Catholic" were grouped into the Catholic higher education (CHE) sample. Those whose institutions had no religious affiliation were placed in the secular higher education group. To allow for a clear comparison, respondents from other religiously affiliated colleges were excluded from the final analysis.

Each group was matched and weighted to produce nationally representative subsamples of 1,000 Catholic college graduates and 1,000 secular college graduates. Matching was conducted using key demographic variables—gender, age, race, and education—drawing on data from the American Community Survey ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2023](#)), voter files, the Current Population Survey ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023](#)), the 2020 National Election Pool exit poll ([Edison Research, 2020](#)), and the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES, 2020). Propensity scores aligned the samples with national benchmarks, followed by post-stratification based on 2020 presidential vote choice and four-way combinations of gender, age, race, and education. Weighting adjustments were applied to ensure that the final sample reflected the demographic composition of the target population, correcting for known biases in online panel recruitment. Trimming was used to reduce

the influence of extreme weights, minimizing the impact of outliers and stabilizing estimates. After trimming, weights were normalized so that the weighted sample size matched the actual sample size, preserving interpretability of results.

In practical terms, this means a respondent from a small Catholic college in the Midwest might receive a statistical weight that allows their responses to better reflect graduates with similar profiles across the broader population. This rigorous procedure helps ensure that any observed differences between the two groups reflect genuine distinctions related to the type of institution attended, rather than artifacts of sampling bias. Initial public presentations of the research used unweighted data to encourage timely and accessible discussion of emerging patterns. For this article, however, we report weighted results, which provide more accurate population estimates and align with standard scholarly practices. While weighting may slightly adjust specific percentages, the overall patterns and conclusions remain consistent.

Participants spanned a wide age range, with the middle 50% born between 1960 and 1989, and a median birth year around 1975. The sample was 56% female and 44% male. Its racial and ethnic composition broadly mirrored the U.S. college-educated population: 72% White, 8% Black, 9% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 5% of mixed or other backgrounds. Respondents were geographically dispersed and came from diverse socioeconomic and political backgrounds, an essential feature for identifying broad trends and subgroup differences across the U.S. college-educated population.

Measures and Survey Instruments

To assess whether Catholic higher education delivers on its broader mission, we identified three outcome areas grounded in the Catholic educational tradition and its commitment to holistic student development: (1) Life Satisfaction and Personal Fulfillment, (2) Civic Engagement and Community Involvement, and (3) Values and Ethical Development. These areas correspond to long-standing aims of Catholic education—to form individuals who live purposeful lives, contribute to the common good, and act with moral integrity. Together, they provide a framework for evaluating whether the educational experience extends beyond career preparation. Within each domain, we used a combination of validated survey scales and custom-designed items, described in more detail below. All questions were self-reported and administered online. Most used a Likert-type response format, and all respondents received the questions in a fixed order to ensure consistency.

Life Satisfaction and Personal Fulfillment

We assessed overall life satisfaction using the well-known five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). On a 7-point scale from “*strongly disagree*” (1) to “*strongly agree*” (7), participants rated statements such as:

- “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”
- “The conditions of my life are excellent.”
- “I am satisfied with my life.”
- “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.”
- “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.”

These five items were combined to provide an overall life satisfaction score for each respondent (higher scores indicate greater satisfaction).

In addition, the survey included questions about sense of purpose and meaning in life. We administered a Meaning in Life scale adapted from existing instruments (Steger et al., 2006), which included statements to capture both the presence of meaning and the active search for meaning. Using a 7-point agreement scale (“*absolutely true*” to “*absolutely untrue*”), participants responded to items such as:

- “I understand my life’s meaning.” (presence of meaning)
- “My life has a clear sense of direction.” (sense of purpose)
- “I have discovered a satisfying life direction.”
- “I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.” (active search for meaning)
- “My life has no clear purpose.” (reverse-coded)

Furthermore, we asked how fulfilled individuals felt in key areas of their lives. Using a scale from “very fulfilled” to “very unfulfilled,” respondents rated their fulfillment in domains such as marriage or romantic relationships, family life, personal friendships/social life, work, and community involvement. This life fulfillment battery aimed to see whether graduates of Catholic institutions experience greater personal fulfillment in social and community domains, in line with the idea of a well-rounded, meaningful life. Finally, we included a question about alignment of goals and values. Respondents considered the values they hold and life goals they have set and reported how well these align with various aspects of their lives (family, social life, career, community involvement, hobbies, health). They were asked, “How much influence do you think your university (its curriculum and community) had on the overall alignment of your life goals and values?”, with response options ranging from “no influence” to “a major influence.” This measure probes whether alumni felt their college experience helped shape a coherent direction in life consistent with their values.

Civic Engagement and Community Involvement

To gauge graduates’ engagement in civic life and volunteerism, the survey included two sets of questions. First, a volunteer activities checklist asked whether, in the past six months, the

respondent had engaged in any community service or helping activities. Multiple responses could be selected. Examples included supporting elderly neighbors, participating in environmental or neighborhood projects, mentoring youth, donating to local causes, or volunteering with civic, charitable, or community-based organizations. An option for “Other (any additional volunteer activity)” was also provided, as well as a “None of these” option for those who had not engaged in any such activities in the past six months.

Second, a civic engagement battery asked how often respondents had participated in various civic or political activities over the past six months. These ranged from public actions (e.g., attending a protest or contacting an official) to private or informal expressions (e.g., sharing political content, discussing politics, or making values-based purchases). Respondents reported frequency across a range of behaviors reflecting both formal and informal civic life. A “None of these” option was included if they had not engaged in any listed civic activity in the time frame. The comprehensive list was intentionally designed to be non-partisan, including forms of engagement that are common across the political spectrum and characteristic of both major parties. It captures both conventional political engagement (voting, advocacy, protest) and community-oriented civic behaviors (such as attending local meetings or altruistic acts such as blood donation). The goal was to see whether Catholic college graduates demonstrate a greater propensity toward volunteerism and civic involvement, reflecting a sense of social responsibility fostered by their education.

Values and Ethical Development

To assess ethical outlook and moral decision making, we used the Moral Foundations Questionnaire framework (Graham et al., 2011) which examines the relative importance individuals place on various moral concerns. Participants rated how relevant 10 moral considerations were to their personal sense of right and wrong, using a scale from 0 (“not at all relevant”) to 5 (“extremely important”). These considerations were: whether someone suffered emotionally, whether people were treated unequally, whether an action showed love for country, whether someone disrespected authority, whether someone violated purity norms, whether someone cared for the vulnerable, whether someone acted unfairly, whether someone betrayed their group, whether someone conformed to tradition, and whether someone did something disgusting. In addition to the moral foundations measure, the survey included two brief psychological assessments: a Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008) and a Locus of Control battery (Rotter, 1966). These instruments were included to broaden our understanding of graduates’ psychological resilience and sense of agency—factors often linked to moral outlook.

Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to compare the two groups (Catholic vs. secular graduates) on each major outcome of interest. For Likert-scale measures, we computed

mean scores for each group, as well as the proportion of respondents selecting high-end responses (for example, those who “agree” or “strongly agree” with positive statements, or those rating something as “extremely important”). For yes/no or checklist items, we calculated the percentage of respondents in each group who endorsed each activity or item. We focus on reporting the descriptive results that illustrate the magnitude of differences between groups. All results were weighted as described to reflect the broader population. For clarity, we highlight key findings in terms of percentage-point differences. Results reported here are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Non-significant findings were excluded or are identified explicitly, such as with resilience.

Life Satisfaction and Sense of Purpose

One of the central questions of this study was whether graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report higher levels of overall life satisfaction and a stronger sense of purpose compared to graduates of secular institutions. The survey results strongly suggest that they do. On the five-item life satisfaction scale, graduates of Catholic colleges had a higher average satisfaction than secular college graduates. More importantly, when looking at those who indicated high satisfaction, the Catholic-educated group stood out. [Table 1](#) captures this result. 64% of Catholic college graduates agreed (somewhat to strongly) that “In most ways my life is close to my ideal,” compared to 58% of secular college graduates, a difference of about 6 percentage points. Similarly, Catholics were more likely to agree that they are satisfied with their life as a whole. These differences emerged consistently on each item of the life satisfaction scale, cumulating in a measurable overall advantage in subjective wellbeing for the Catholic college group.

Not only did Catholic higher education graduates report greater satisfaction with life, they also expressed a marginally stronger sense of direction and purpose in life. When asked about having a “clear sense of direction” in life, about 74% of Catholic college graduates indicated they have clear life direction, versus 69% of secular graduates. This 5-percentage-point gap aligns with the pattern seen in the meaning-in-life questions. Catholic college alumni tended to affirm purpose-oriented statements (e.g., “My life has a clear sense of direction”) at higher rates and were also slightly more likely to indicate that they had identified a satisfying life mission for themselves. At the same time, they were more likely (by roughly 9 percentage points on one item) to say they continue to search for meaning in life. This suggests that Catholic-educated graduates combine a strong existing sense of purpose with an openness to ongoing reflection and growth. In other words, they feel guided by clear values and goals yet also see life as a continual journey of finding deeper meaning. This combination could reflect the influence of an education that encourages not only confidence in the value and meaning of one’s life but also in lifelong spiritual and personal growth.

In sum, the data support the idea that Catholic higher education is associated with greater life satisfaction and a durable sense of purpose. These differences were consistent across all five life satisfaction items and multiple indicators of purpose/meaning. They paint a picture of Catholic

college alumni leading lives that they perceive as closer to their ideal, more fulfilled, and guided by clear values, precisely the kind of holistic outcome one might expect from an educational tradition rooted in human dignity and in Jesus' call to the fullness of life.

Table 1

Life Satisfaction and Sense of Purpose Among Graduates of Secular vs. Catholic Higher Education Institutions

Life satisfaction / Purpose measure	Catholic alumni	Secular alumni	Difference (pp)
"Life is close to ideal" (agreed to strongly agreed)	64%	58%	+6 pp
"My life has clear direction" (somewhat to absolutely true)	74%	69%	+5 pp
"Always searching for something that makes my life feel significant" (somewhat to absolutely true: ongoing search)	63%	54%	+9 pp

Note. "Difference" indicates the percentage-point (pp) difference in agreement rates (Catholic minus Secular).

Community and Civic Engagement

The second major area of interest was civic engagement and community involvement. We asked whether graduates of Catholic institutions would demonstrate greater engagement in their communities than secular-institution graduates. Overall, Catholic college graduates were more likely to be involved in their communities, both through volunteer work and through civic participation, aligning with the expectation that an ethos of service is instilled during their college years.

In terms of volunteerism, Catholic college graduates had a higher participation rate in volunteer activities. The most common activities for both groups included donating goods or money to local causes and sharing items or helping neighbors, but on nearly every type of volunteer activity listed, the Catholic-educated group showed equal or higher involvement rates. For example, 44% of Catholic alumni donated to a local cause versus 40% of secular alumni; 12% of Catholic alumni had participated in a fundraising walk, run, or marathon versus 7% of secular alumni; 11% of Catholic grads served on a school or community board versus 5% of secular grads. When combining all forms of community service (from charity donations to hands-on volunteering), about 78% of Catholic alumni had engaged in at least one form of volunteer or community service activity in the six months prior to the survey, compared to roughly 70% of secular alumni. Put differently, only 22% of Catholic graduates reported no volunteer activity in that period, versus 30% of secular graduates who did not engage in any volunteering. These show that the average Catholic college graduate is somewhat more inclined to give time or resources to community and charitable activities after college.

The data in [Table 2](#) reinforce the pattern that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are, on balance, more civically active than their secular peers. Although the differences for individual activities are modest, they collectively paint a consistent picture: a greater share of Catholic alumni engage in civic life. Compared to secular graduates, Catholic grads were more likely to attend a board or council meeting that discussed political issues (9% vs. 5%), display a sign supporting a candidate or cause (9% vs. 6%), donate blood (13% vs. 10%), or contribute financially to their place of worship (30% vs. 24%). Most notably, they were 5 percentage points more likely to have engaged in at least one civic activity in the last six months (82% vs. 77%), meaning they were more likely to have participated in at least one civic activity. Taken together, these small but consistent differences suggest that Catholic college alumni are, overall, slightly more civically engaged than their secular counterparts.

Table 2

Civic Engagement Activities Among Secular vs. Catholic College Alumni

Civic/Political engagement (past 6 months)	Catholic alumni	Secular alumni	Difference
Participated in ≥ 1 civic/political activity	82%	77%	+5 pp
Voted in a local election	43%	39%	+4 pp
Attended a board or council meeting that discussed political issues	9%	5%	+4 pp
Displayed a sign supporting a candidate or cause	9%	6%	+3 pp
Donated to their place of worship	30%	24%	+6 pp
Donated blood	13%	10%	+3 pp

Note. “Participated in ≥ 1 ” is the proportion who did engage in at least one of the listed civic activities (the complement of “No civic engagement”). Selected specific activities are shown with their individual participation rates.

It is also illuminating to consider social connectedness and fulfillment as an outcome related to community engagement. Recall that in the life fulfillment ratings, respondents indicated how fulfilled they feel in their social life and community involvement. Here again, differences emerged. Catholic college graduates were more likely to feel fulfilled in their social relationships and in how they engage with their community. Specifically, about 63% of Catholic graduates reported feeling “fulfilled” or “very fulfilled” in their social life (friendships and personal relationships) compared to roughly 54% of secular graduates, a roughly 9-percentage-point difference in subjective social fulfillment. Likewise, 54% of Catholic alumni felt fulfilled by their level of community involvement, versus 48% of secular alumni, a difference of 6 percentage points. Catholic graduates (63%) were also significantly more likely to report fulfillment in their work life or career compared to secular graduates (54%). These subjective fulfillment figures complement the behavioral data on volunteering and civic action. Catholic college graduates not only do more in their communities but also derive a greater sense of personal fulfillment from their social connections and community

participation. This is consistent with the emphasis Catholic institutions place on community and service as integral to a meaningful life.

In summary, across both objective measures (what alumni do in their communities) and subjective measures (how connected and fulfilled they feel), graduates of Catholic colleges demonstrate greater community engagement. They volunteer at higher rates and are marginally more active in civic matters. Importantly, they also report feeling more socially connected and that their involvement in the community is rewarding. These outcomes suggest that Catholic higher education may cultivate a lasting sense of civic responsibility and belonging, a reflection of its deeper mission to form individuals who care for their neighbors, contribute to the common good, and live in solidarity with others.

Ethical Orientation and Decision Making

The third key area of comparison was ethical decision-making. We wanted to see whether a Catholic education correlates with a different approach to moral reasoning in adult life. The results here were striking. Graduates of Catholic colleges appear to place greater importance on moral and ethical principles when making decisions, compared to graduates of secular institutions. When we analyze the moral foundations responses, the most salient finding is that Catholic college alumni were much more likely to rate multiple moral considerations as “extremely important” in judging right from wrong. To put a number on it, Catholic graduates were about 19 percentage points more likely than secular graduates to say that the various moral issues surveyed were extremely important to them.

This pattern is reflected in the average scores for moral foundations, where Catholic alumni consistently rated each value slightly higher than their secular peers. The gaps were modest—ranging from +0.3 to +1.0 points on a 30-point scale—but consistent. While both groups prioritized compassion and fairness as the most important moral considerations overall, Catholic alumni still came out slightly ahead, scoring +0.6 on compassion and +0.3 on fairness. Catholic graduates showed the largest differences on moral concerns tied to group loyalty and standards of purity or decency, scoring +1.0 point higher than secular graduates on both. These consistent differences in average scores help underscore the broader trend: Catholic college graduates tended to approach moral judgment with a more comprehensive set of ethical values.

The data in [Table 3](#) convey the difference in ethical outlook. Over half (53%) of Catholic college graduates gave “extremely important” ratings to at least five of the moral dimensions presented, compared to about one-third (34%) of secular graduates. In other words, a majority of Catholic-educated alumni see a wide range of moral concerns as critical to their judgments, whereas only a minority of secular-educated alumni do the same. Additionally, a non-trivial segment of Catholic alumni (23%) indicated that every single one of the ten moral considerations

was extremely important to them, nearly double the proportion of secular alumni who held all ten at that level (12%). This suggests that Catholic higher education alumni are more likely to have an expansive moral compass, where multiple values—such as caring for others, fairness, loyalty, respect, spiritual purity—all matter deeply in their decision making.

Table 3

Importance of Moral Considerations in Decision Making for Secular vs. Catholic College Alumni

Moral and Ethical Decision Making	Catholic Alumni	Secular Alumni	Difference
Rated ≥ 5 moral factors as “extremely important” in judgments	53%	34%	+19 pp
Rated all 10 moral considerations as “extremely important”	23%	12%	+11 pp

In contrast to these differences in ethical decision making, the survey found no statistically significant differences between Catholic and secular college graduates on measures of personal resilience. Respondents rated their agreement with statements such as, “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times” and “I have a hard time making it through stressful events” (reverse-coded), producing composite resilience scores. The average scores for both groups were nearly identical, with only negligible variation.

In summary, the evidence points to a distinctive impact of Catholic higher education on graduates’ ethical frameworks. They emerge with a heightened emphasis on moral principles and a greater willingness to incorporate those principles into everyday decision making. These results support the idea that Catholic institutions succeed in shaping students’ stronger commitment to ethical principles and their consideration of a broader range of moral values, an approach likely shaped by Catholic Social Teaching, with its emphasis on human dignity, compassion, and responsibility for the common good.

Findings Across Demographic Groups

An important question in interpreting these results is whether the observed differences between Catholic and secular college graduates hold true across different types of individuals. Given the diverse and representative nature of our sample, we examined whether factors such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, or political affiliation influenced the patterns described above. For example, could the “Catholic advantage” be more about who attends Catholic colleges rather than what those colleges do? However, the analysis revealed that the holistic benefits of Catholic higher education were remarkably consistent across subgroups.

Statistically, we tested for interactions between education type (Catholic vs. secular) and key demographic variables across the main outcome measures. No significant interactions were found.

Notably, this held even among respondents from different religions or who identified as non-religious. In practical terms, this means that Catholic college graduates tended to report higher life satisfaction than similar graduates from secular colleges—regardless of gender, age, race, or political affiliation. The differences in moral and ethical orientation also persisted across ideological lines.

This broader pattern was echoed in how graduates perceived the impact of their college experience. Catholic higher education alumni were more likely to credit their alma maters with shaping their life direction and core values. Approximately 23% of Catholic college graduates said their university had a “major influence” on the alignment of their life goals and values, compared to about 14% of secular college graduates. This 9-point difference suggests that nearly half of Catholic college alumni view their education as having profoundly shaped their values and life trajectories, whereas a smaller portion of secular college alumni report a similar impact. The consistency across demographic groups, combined with the strength of graduates’ reflections, suggests that the advantages associated with a Catholic college education are not limited to any one subset of students. Rather, they reflect something distinctive about the Catholic higher education experience itself.

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical support for the proposition that a college education is “more than money,” especially in the context of Catholic higher education. In an era when public discourse often fixates on graduates’ salaries and financial return on investment (ROI), our findings highlight significant non-monetary outcomes where Catholic college alumni excel relative to their peers from secular institutions. These outcomes—higher life satisfaction, greater community engagement, and a stronger ethical framework—represent exactly the kind of holistic human development that Catholic universities have long claimed to foster.

First, Catholic higher education alumni reported living more satisfied lives. They were more likely to view their lives as close to ideal and to feel they had achieved important life goals. They also tended to have a clearer sense of purpose. The fact that Catholic college graduates score higher on these measures suggests that their education may have equipped them with tools for finding fulfillment beyond material satisfaction. Catholic institutions often emphasize reflective learning, vocation, and the integration of faith or values with one’s chosen career and personal life. They also tend to require a liberal arts core curriculum that situates students’ majors in a broader view of life. This outcome is a critical rejoinder to the purely financial narrative. A college that helps you build a fulfilling life is providing value that cannot be captured in starting-salary statistics.

Second, our findings on community and civic engagement reveal that Catholic college alumni are more active citizens and neighbors. They volunteer more frequently and participate in civic life at higher rates. They also report greater fulfillment in their social and community lives. This aligns closely with the mission statements of many Catholic universities, which often speak of forming

students to be service-oriented leaders and responsible community members. The data suggest that these are not empty slogans. There is a measurable difference in post-college behavior. A Catholic college graduate is a bit more likely to vote in local elections, to serve on school boards or parish councils, to coach Little League, or to help at a food pantry. Over a lifetime, these differences can have a compounding positive impact on civil society. Thus, Catholic higher education contributes to the wellbeing of society in ways that a singular focus on earnings would miss.

Third, and perhaps most striking, is the difference in ethical orientation. Graduates of Catholic colleges demonstrate a deeper incorporation of ethical principles into their lives. They are significantly more likely to weigh moral considerations heavily when making decisions. This suggests that Catholic colleges succeed in instilling robust moral reasoning abilities and values in their students. Through curricula that not only include philosophy and theology but also incorporate Catholic social teaching in ethics classes required for majors (e.g., bioethics, business ethics), Catholic institutions appear to imprint an enduring ethical awareness on their graduates. The findings here reinforce the argument that higher education's value lies not just in knowledge or job preparation but in shaping character. Catholic colleges, true to their heritage, seem to be particularly effective at that task.

Crucially, these benefits of a Catholic higher education cut across demographic lines, indicating a robust and general effect. The consistency of the "Catholic advantage" in life satisfaction, engagement, and ethics across different subgroups strengthens the case that the difference lies in the educational experience itself rather than pre-existing characteristics of students. It is conceivable, for example, that students who choose Catholic colleges might start out more religious or service-minded, but our representative sample and internal analyses mitigate this concern. It seems that something in the campus environment, pedagogy, or community of Catholic colleges is benefiting students of all stripes. Future research could explore what specific aspects (e.g., smaller campus size, community service requirements, campus ministry involvement, liberal arts core curriculums) drive these positive outcomes. For now, we can say that the evidence upholds what Catholic educators have long asserted: their schools produce well-rounded graduates equipped for meaningful lives.

Reframing the Value Proposition of College

These findings carry implications for how we talk about the value of college, and they offer a counternarrative to the dominant financial view. As the introduction of this article discussed, higher education is often reduced to a calculus of tuition costs versus future earnings. While understandable, that perspective misses a host of outcomes that, although harder to quantify in dollars, are central to individual and societal thriving. Our study shows that graduates themselves experience these outcomes. They feel the difference in their own life satisfaction, in

their communities, and in their moral choices. Thus, when assessing the “worth” of an education, stakeholders should expand the conversation beyond starting salary and debt load. For Catholic institutions in particular, the results provide a powerful set of talking points grounded in data. Attending a Catholic college is associated with living a happier, more purposeful life, being a more engaged citizen, and making more ethically informed decisions. These are outcomes parents and students care about. They are also outcomes that benefit employers and society at large.

From a policy and leadership perspective, Catholic higher education leaders can use this evidence to advocate for the importance of their mission in the broader higher education landscape. In a time of enrollment challenges, illustrating concrete holistic benefits is key. The findings could be shared with prospective students to demonstrate that a Catholic college education provides a “return on investment” in human flourishing, producing graduates who not only find jobs but also find meaning and a way to contribute to the world.

It is also worth noting that secular institutions may take cues from these results. The outcomes highlighted—wellbeing, engagement, ethics—are not exclusive to religious colleges. Any college can strive to improve in these areas. The data from secular graduates in our study show that many are indeed satisfied, community-involved, and ethical. The Catholic group is not alone in these traits, just higher on average. Thus, one could interpret our findings as a call to higher education in general to prioritize holistic student development. In an age where public trust in higher education is wavering ([Pew Research Center, 2024a, May 23](#)), demonstrating that colleges cultivate happier, civically responsible, morally grounded adults is critical. Catholic colleges provide an example of how an intentional focus on the whole person yields dividends. Their experience could guide secular institutions looking to articulate and enhance their own contributions to students’ personal growth.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers strong evidence of differences between Catholic and secular college alumni, it is not without limitations. One important caveat is that the data are cross-sectional and self-reported. We compared two groups of graduates at one point in time. Therefore, we cannot conclusively prove that attending a Catholic college causes these positive outcomes. It is possible that students who choose Catholic institutions are in some ways predisposed to higher life satisfaction or community engagement. Future research might explore whether such predispositions can be detected, for instance, by examining whether students attended Catholic high schools or selected Catholic colleges because of personal values rather than financial aid incentives. We attempted to account for this by weighting the samples to national demographics and examining a broad range of respondents, but unmeasured differences (such as level of religiosity or family upbringing) could play a role. We hope to repeat and expand this study

annually and build a longitudinal dataset, which would allow us to better assess how and to what extent the college experience itself contributes to these outcomes.

Another area for further investigation is the experience of graduates of other religiously affiliated colleges (e.g., Protestant Christian colleges, Jewish or other faith-based institutions). It would be interesting to see if similar patterns hold for alumni of other faith-related schools or if Catholic schools are unique in certain outcomes. Likewise, qualitative research could enrich our quantitative findings. Interviews or focus groups with alumni might reveal *how* their college shaped their values or satisfaction, examining the influence of, for example, specific programs, mentors, or experiences that made a difference. This would help institutions better understand the mechanisms of impact.

Finally, the measures for resilience and locus of control might need reconsideration. The study found no significant differences between Catholic and secular college graduates, and while these neutral results are informative, they may also reflect a limitation of the instruments used. The locus of control scale presents a binary between internal and external control, implying that outcomes are either shaped by one's own agency or determined by outside forces such as luck. This framing omits a third theological possibility central to Catholic thought: cooperation with God. The Catholic intellectual tradition does not simply place agency within the self or in fate but often emphasizes a partnership with God in discerning one's vocation and responding to life's challenges. Because this understanding is part of Catholic education, Catholic graduates may not neatly map onto the internal/external dichotomy presented by standard psychological scales. Future research might explore whether different instruments—ones attentive to religious worldviews—would capture this dimension of human formation more accurately.

Conclusion

This research set out to test a core claim that the value of Catholic higher education extends well beyond financial return. In a public discourse increasingly shaped by cost-benefit calculations, we asked whether Catholic colleges and universities contribute to outcomes consistent with their broader mission: to form whole persons, foster moral responsibility, and prepare graduates to live meaningful lives. The findings strongly support that claim. Compared to their peers from secular institutions, graduates of Catholic colleges report greater life satisfaction, deeper engagement in their communities, and a stronger orientation toward ethical and moral responsibility. Importantly, these patterns held across lines of gender, age, race, political ideology, and religious affiliation, suggesting that the formative influence of Catholic higher education is not limited to a particular type of student but reflects something distinctive about the educational experience itself. Graduates not only live differently but also credit their Catholic college experience for shaping their values, priorities, and life direction.

In a time when colleges are under pressure to prove their worth, these findings offer a compelling reminder that education is not merely a private investment in earning potential. It is also a public good that shapes civic life and moral culture. Catholic colleges, in particular, emerge as institutions that cultivate not just human capital but human character—informed by Catholic Social Teaching and grounded in a vision of human dignity, solidarity, and the common good. Their alumni reflect the kind of formation that Catholic education has always sought to provide: people who live with purpose, care for others, and attend to what is good and right.

This is the story Catholic higher education can offer to a society hungry for meaning. College is worth it, not only because of the job you get but because of the person you are called to become. The true value of education, especially Catholic education, lies in its capacity to form lives of integrity, service, and hope. These outcomes benefit individuals and communities alike. They are, in every sense, more than money. They invite us to imagine a richer future for higher education, grounded in mission, meaning, and the dignity of the person.

References

- Bauman, D. (2025, March 17). Harvard joins list of colleges topping \$80K in annual cost of attendance. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/17/harvard-free-tuition>
- Cockle, T. F., Melton, K. K., Hansen, A. Z., Glanzer, P. L., & Schnitker, S. S. (2024). Christian higher education at secular universities: A multiple-case study of Christian study centers and institutes for Catholic thought. *Christian Higher Education*, 23(4), 397–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2024.2341855>
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49(1), 71–75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13
- Edison Research. (2020). *2020 National Election Pool exit poll* [Data set]. National Election Pool. <https://www.edisonresearch.com/>
- Education Data Initiative. (2025, February). *Student loan debt statistics*. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-statistics>
- Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2022). *Ranking 4,500 colleges by ROI*. Retrieved September 5, 2025, from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/roi2025/>
- Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 366–385. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021847>
- Grawe, N. D. (2018). *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harvard University (American National Election Studies & YouGov). (2021, March 26). *Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2020* [Data set]. Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/E9N6PH>
- King, J. (2015). *Review essay on Catholic higher education after Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. *Journal of Moral Theology*, 4(2), 167–191. <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/11302-review-essay-on-catholic-higher-education-after-ex-corde-ecclesiae>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2022–23 data collection*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>
- Pew Research Center. (2019, January 31). *Religion's relationship to happiness, civic engagement and health around the world*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/>
- Pew Research Center. (2024a, May 23). *Public views on the value of a college degree*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/05/23/public-views-on-the-value-of-a-college-degree/>
- Pew Research Center. (2024b, January 24). *Are religious "nones" less involved in U.S. civic life than the affiliated?* <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/are-nones-less-involved-in-civic-life-than-people-who-identify-with-a-religion/>
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 80(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976>

- Schreiner, L. A. (2024). College student thriving: An examination of undergraduate, adult, and graduate students' experiences in Christian colleges and universities. *Christian Higher Education*, 23(3), 161–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2024.2306239>
- Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The brief resilience scale: Assessing the ability to bounce back. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 15(3), 194–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705500802222972>
- Sokol, B. W., & Marle, P. D. (2019). Civic and faith life in college: A two part investigation of university students' political and spiritual engagement. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(5), 550–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1669454>
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1), 80–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.80>
- The Daily. (2023, September 7). *Is college worth it?* [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Daily*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/07/podcasts/the-daily/college-worth-cost.html>
- The Economist. (2023, August 10). Was your degree really worth it? <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/08/10/was-your-degree-really-worth-it>
- Tough, P. (2023, September 5). Americans are losing faith in the value of college. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-cost.html>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2011). *New American Bible (Revised Edition)*. <https://www.bible.usccb.org/bible>.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). *Current Population Survey* [Data set]. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/cps>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey: 2023* [Data set]. U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>
- Vogelgesang, L. J., & Astin, A. W. (2005). *Post-college civic engagement among graduates* (HERI Research Report No. 2). Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles. <https://www.heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/Atlantic%20-%20Report%202.pdf>
- Whitford, E. (2025, April 2). Wellesley surpasses \$100K sticker price. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/financial-aid/2025/04/02/wellesley-surpasses-100k-sticker-price>
- YouGov. (2024). *Survey panel methodology*. <https://today.yougov.com/about/panel-methodology>