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# VOX POPULI:



**PRIVATE COLLEGES—THE TALK OF THE NATION**

*by George Dehne, President, GDA Integrated Services • John Ross, Senior Consultant, GDA Integrated Services*

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In the winter of 2003, GDA Integrated Services conducted a telephone survey of 1,000 randomly selected adults between the ages of 25 and 65 throughout the nation for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The ten-page report of the findings, “What America Thinks About Higher Education,” appeared in the May 1, 2003 edition of *The Chronicle*. The margin of error was +/- 3%.

On the following pages, we look at what the data signify for private colleges—especially liberal arts colleges—and provide tips for utilizing the findings.

## GREAT CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Our *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey demonstrated overwhelming confidence in America’s private colleges and universities. When it comes to the country’s institutions, the level of confidence expressed in private colleges and universities was second only to that given to the nation’s military. (The survey was conducted less than a month before the war with Iraq.) Those following, in order, were police, four-year public universities and community colleges. This is the kind of intelligence that private college presidents and staff can use to demonstrate that the sector is highly valued and should be treated as such.

## PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY: PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

When asked, 41% of those surveyed volunteered that the quality of education was better at private institutions while 13% said public institutions. About four of ten (38%) said they were about the same.

As we all suspected, there were regional differences. Respondents living in the Northeast were most likely to rate private colleges in their states as being of very high quality while those in the South were least likely to do so.

How would you describe the quality of the PRIVATE four-year colleges and universities in your state?

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
<b>Very high quality</b>	34%	30%	21%	23%
<b>High quality</b>	29%	36%	39%	35%
<b>Good</b>	16%	17%	19%	19%
<b>Average or low quality</b>	10%	8%	13%	7%

Regardless of where your college is situated, this information should encourage private colleges to boldly declare that with higher quality comes a higher cost—but a cost not born by the taxpayer.

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

When asked, “If money were not an issue, would you rather have your child attend a private or public university?” 45% said private while 25% said public. About three of ten (28%) said it “didn’t matter.”

In other words, nearly half of the respondents had greater confidence in the quality of private institutions, knowledge each president should use when dealing with state and local officials as well as donors and prospective clients.

## EDUCATION LEVELS

About half of those surveyed (51%) had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. Two of ten of those who had not earned a four-year degree expected to earn one. This reflects the results of GDA Integrated Services own surveys of adults. It also tells those colleges with a program for “non-traditional age” students that, at any given time, about two of ten adults who do not have a bachelor’s degree are likely candidates for enrollment. Of course, depending on the population base of your institution, this can be good news or bad news.

Those who had earned a bachelor’s degree described the institution from which it was earned in this way:

- Large public state college or university ..... 48%
- A smaller state college..... 17%
- Modest-sized private university ..... 15%
- Liberal arts college ..... 8%
- Large private research university ..... 7%
- Specialty college for art, engineering, business... 4%

Alumni of private institutions strongly believed private colleges to be of higher quality than publics. They were more likely to want to enroll their children in private institutions.

## PARENTAL AMBITIONS

Graduates of liberal arts colleges were also more likely than others (88%) to say that it was very likely that their children would seek a four-year college degree while graduates of modest-sized private universities were less likely (76%) to make the same statement. Public college and university graduates were far less likely to say their children would seek a four-year college degree.

Graduates of liberal arts colleges were far more likely to want to see their children enrolling in either the kinds of colleges they graduated from or in modest-sized private universities. Graduates of all other institutional types were not as loyal. Concentrating on alumni children clearly makes sense for liberal arts colleges. In addition, consider swapping alumni lists with other liberal arts colleges. For many reasons, students often do not want to follow their parents’ footsteps but still prefer a liberal arts college.

## SATISFACTION WITH THEIR COLLEGE EDUCATION

Graduates of private colleges and universities were much more likely to report being very satisfied with their college education than graduates of public institutions. Two-thirds of the graduates of liberal arts colleges said they were very satisfied with the education they received. In comparison, only 54% of the graduates of public doctoral institutions and 45% of smaller state colleges reported similar levels of satisfaction. While it would be more effective to have your own alumni’s sense of satisfaction, if your institution has not yet conducted market-oriented alumni surveys, these findings should be used in promoting your college.

## EXPECTATIONS OF A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

By a large majority, participants in the study believed preparing undergraduate students for a career to be the primary role of a college education. However, nearly two-thirds also said that preparing adults for better jobs, preparing future leaders for our society and preparing students to be responsible citizens were very important roles of colleges and universities.

Adults who graduated from liberal arts colleges differed from the general adult population. Below is a ranking of roles that more than 50% of the liberal arts alumni felt were very important:

- Prepare future leaders of our society – 74%
- Prepare students to be responsible citizens – 68%
- Offer a broad-based general education to undergraduate students – 66%
- Prepare its undergraduate students for a career – 63%
- Teach students how to cope with a rapidly changing world – 58%
- Help students develop good values and ethical positions – 58%
- Discover more about the world through research – 55%
- Provide education to adults so they qualify for better jobs – 53%
- Prepare undergraduate students for graduate or professional school – 53%

Not surprisingly, liberal arts college alumni were significantly less enthusiastic about the importance of career preparation than graduates of other institutional types. We also see in the above list other expectations of a college or university that were not as important to alumni from other institutional types.

For example, we see that preparing students for a future in a rapidly changing world is a theme liberal arts colleges should exploit. In our experience, all liberal arts colleges claim they prepare students for changing careers and for the future. Apparently the message got through to the liberal arts college alumni. The challenge for a liberal arts college is to prove it to prospective students, donors and the public. Can you point to any tangible activity or program at your institution demonstrating that your college intentionally prepares its students for a changing world?

We also see that liberal arts college graduates, more than the alumni from other institutional types, cared about preparing students to be responsible citizens and helping students to develop good values and ethical positions. Parents of prospective students should always be reminded of these outcomes of a liberal arts college. Once again, we recommend demonstrating that these are intentional outcomes by pointing out such things as required courses in ethics or honor codes that require responsible citizenship.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUCCESS

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the graduates of large private universities said that their undergraduate degree was very important to their current success in their career, but only half (52%) of the graduates of liberal arts college said the same. This might reflect the view that a liberal arts education is not meant to contribute only to success in one's career. On the other hand, it might mean these liberal arts alumni attribute career success to their graduate degrees. About four of ten (39%) of the liberal arts college alumni earned an advanced degree. As we have found in our own GDA Integrated Services research, many parents believe a private liberal arts college is the best preparation for graduate or professional school. This tells us that liberal arts colleges should emphasize career preparation that may include graduate or professional schools.

## PAYING FOR COLLEGE

Liberal arts college graduates were the least likely to say they wanted their children to attend the college or university that would cost them the least amount of personal funds. Graduates of large privates and modest-sized privates were more likely than graduates of publics to seek the least expensive institutions.

When it comes to paying for college, graduates of liberal arts colleges were more likely than others to believe that parents should foot the bill. They were also slightly more likely than alumni from other institutional types to say that a four-year degree was always worth the price.

This dedication to higher education and acceptance of financial responsibility bodes well for liberal arts colleges. However, there are just not enough parents with a liberal arts college education to fill all the seats. Still, this commitment to education can be used to demonstrate the impact of your college's education on its alumni.

These data suggest, generally speaking, that scholarship or loan programs expressly for alumni may give a college a distinct marketing advantage. If your institution doesn't already do so, ask applicants for the name and type of college from which their parents graduated.

In our GDA Integrated Services research, we have found two predictors of enrollment in a private college or university. First, if a parent attended a private high school or college and/or the student is enrolled in a private high school, there is very high probability that the student will enroll in a private college. Second, if the mother of the student works in education, the student is far more likely to enroll in a private institution.

## COMMITMENT TO THE RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCE

Liberal arts graduates were dramatically more likely than others to strongly agree that living on campus was an important part of the four-year college experience. GDA Integrated Services does not see

the residential nature of the liberal arts college merely as important but rather as *essential* to compete with larger institutions with more courses and resources. It is our view that liberal arts colleges must demonstrate that the residential experience contributes nearly as much as the academic program to a student's learning. In fact, in our national surveys of college-bound students, more than six of ten say they expect to learn as much from their out-of-class experience as they do from the academic program. Demonstrating that your institution values and recognizes learning in and out of class and in all its possible iterations may be key to thriving in the years ahead.

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Half of the graduates of liberal arts colleges said it was very important that their children attend a college with a religious affiliation. Furthermore, those children were five times more likely than the children of graduates of any other type of college to do so. Unfortunately, GDA Integrated Services national research shows that fewer than two of ten college-bound students prefer a church-related college. We recommend church-related colleges conduct focus groups with current students and alumni to better understand what they gained personally, spiritually and educationally by attending a college with a religious affiliation.

## DIFFICULTY IN CHOOSING A COLLEGE

Of all the institutional types, alumni from liberal arts colleges had the greatest difficulty in helping their children choose a college. This may be due to the possible tension between a parent who feels strongly about the liberal arts college experience and dealing with a child who seeks a large institution or a better-known one.

This suggests that liberal arts colleges should offer objective workshops for the children of alumni (and any others who are interested) on how to choose the right college. It's our experience that colleges that provide such services end up increasing the percentage of legacies.

## LIBERAL ARTS VS. CAREER-FOCUSED

While debate swirls in college circles regarding the value of career-oriented vs. liberal arts education, it appears that American adults see very little difference between the two. In fact, among all adults who believed that offering a broad-based general education to undergraduates was a very important role for colleges, more than eight of ten (83%) also believed that it was very important for colleges to prepare undergraduate students for careers.

In comparison, it is also worth noting that 59% of those believing preparation of undergraduates for careers to be a very important role of colleges and universities also believed that offering a broad-based general education was important. Thus, those interested in the liberal arts would likely be career-focused as well. On the other hand, those with a strong career preference might not be much interested in the liberal arts.

As we all know, the liberal arts and sciences are not well understood among adults or their children. And college descriptions of core requirements as “general education” tend to diminish the importance of the foundations of the liberal arts college academic experience. Most effective are colleges that describe general education and the liberal arts as sets of competencies applicable to a wide range of careers and personal goals. In a recent national survey conducted by GDA Integrated Services, more than two of three college-bound students said these characteristics, often attributed to a liberal arts education, would increase their interest in a college:

- Provides students with a foundation of knowledge needed for most careers
- Ensures what you learn each year builds on what you learned the year before
- Stresses the importance of understanding how different fields relate
- Ensures that students learn about a lot of subjects and fields

## FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Many GDA Integrated Services liberal arts colleges consider it part of their mission to serve students from families having no experience with higher education. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* survey, 37% of families reported educational attainment of less than an associate degree. Generally speaking, they were more apt to live in rural areas or small towns than other respondents.

There is a popular belief that families with no college experience are the most eager to see their child attend college. Yet this belief does not appear to be true. Families of first-generation students were more dubious about the value of a college degree. In fact, only 32% of the adults who did not attend college, compared with 47% of those with bachelor’s degrees, said “a four-year college education for your children is always worth the price.” Furthermore, adults who did not attend college were less likely than those with higher educational attainment to have a child who attended a liberal arts college. Those adults with less than an associate degree had a greater tendency to send their children to community colleges than those who had earned baccalaureate or graduate degrees.

Not surprisingly, adults without college experience were often unable (24%) to even guess at what they thought constituted a high-cost college, nor could they estimate the cost of the public institution in their state. Adults with no higher education experience were more likely (35%) than adults with bachelor’s degrees (18%) to say they expected their children to attend the college or university that would cost their family the least amount of personal funds.

They were also least likely to believe a residential experience to be an important aspect of a four-year college degree but were most likely to seek a college or university with a religious affiliation.

<b>Very important role for a college to perform:</b>	<b>No College Experience</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>
Prepare students to be responsible citizens	71%	59%
Help elementary and high schools do a better job teaching children	71%	53%
Teach students to get along with people from different backgrounds	64%	53%
Prepare undergraduate students for graduate or professional school	63%	52%
Help attract new business to its region	48%	33%
Improve the image of the state in which it is located	43%	23%
Provide useful information to the public on issues affecting their daily lives	42%	28%
Help local businesses and industries in the area be successful	41%	33%

Adults with no college experience had somewhat different expectations of a college or university as the table above shows.

To attract first generation students, liberal arts colleges need to demonstrate that they are preparing students to be responsible citizens who are able to get along with others from different backgrounds and prepared to go to graduate or professional school if they so choose.

On the other hand, if your college is nestled in an area where educational attainment is low, your college can endear itself by working with elementary and secondary schools to help them do a better job teaching students. Active (and visible) participation in economic development of the area should be an external priority. And finally, when your institution gains kudos or recognition for something regionally or nationally, promote it, not necessarily bringing recognition to the college but rather improving the image of the region and state.

Finally, we believe that savvy colleges should train a member of their admissions staff to be a specialist in meeting the needs of first-time college families who

are identified in the inquiry process. Institutions that are effective in allaying the concerns of first-time college families and who help them feel good about the admissions and financial aid processes should see an increase in enrollments among that sector.

## CONCLUSIONS

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* survey on “What Americans Think About Higher Education” provides many more insights into the minds of many segments of the public. In this summary, we chose only to focus on those issues that might affect liberal arts colleges. Our objective was not only to provide some tips for using this research but also to demonstrate the value of secondary research. GDA Integrated Services is a leader in the use of secondary research and environmental scanning in- and outside of higher education that can provide directions for colleges and universities.

**GDA Integrated Services** is a marketing consulting, research, strategic planning and services firm specializing in customized, integrated marketing solutions that help colleges and universities compete successfully for students, funds and visibility in the twenty-first century.

Our capabilities include:

### **Admissions/Student Recruitment**

- Broadcast E-mail
- Campus Exhibits
- Communications Assessments
- Consulting/Counseling
- Data Management Assessments
- Direct Mail
- Graduate Students
- Institution-wide Student Recruitment Assessments
- International Students
- Operations Assessments
- Retention Assessments
- Retention Strategies
- Tele-Recruiting
- Part-time/Non-traditional Students
- Undergraduate Students

### **Creative Services**

- Audio/Video Production
- Branding/Positioning
- Communications Assessments
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- Institutional Identity Programs
- Print Publications
- Virtual Tours
- Website Assessments
- Website Design

### **Financial Aid**

- Consulting/Counseling
- Leveraging Matrix
- Operations Assessments
- Packaging Strategies

### **Public Relations**

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- Board Relations
- Community Relations
- Consulting/Counseling
- Crisis Management
- Guaranteed Visibility Campaigns
- Program Assessments
- Target Cities Development

### **Research and Strategic Planning**

- Admitted Student Surveys
- Alumni Surveys
- Anec-Data Studies
- Attrition/Retention Surveys
- Current Student Surveys
- Data Analysis
- Environmental Scanning
- Graduate Student Surveys
- National Normative Data
- Non-applicant Surveys
- Part-time/Non-traditional Student Surveys
- Price/Quality Index
- Qualitative Market Survey Research
- Segmentation Analysis of Available Research
- Student Typologies
- Survey Design

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