

VANDERBILT
UNIVERSITY
PEABODY
COLLEGE

PERCEPTIONS & PREFERENCES

CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL
SELECTION IN SOUTHWESTERN CT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Organizational Context

Notre Dame High School is a Catholic high school located in Fairfield, CT with 600 students. The school serves grades 9-12 and charges \$15,750 annually for tuition, which is on the low end for private high school education in the area.

The school is located on the town line between Bridgeport, CT and Fairfield, CT, both of which are situated within the larger entity of Fairfield County. Fairfield County has a median household income of \$90,645 as compared to \$78,444 state-wide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). It is home to the top seven richest towns in CT, while also being home to Bridgeport, the poorest city in the state. Bridgeport has a median household income of \$46,662 and more than 20% of residents live below the poverty line.

The school serves families in the area who are interested in sending their children to a private school with a Catholic mission and, as compared to other offerings, an affordable price tag. Similar to many Catholic High Schools across the nation, they are experiencing significant and concerning enrollment challenges.

Problem

Notre Dame is facing an enrollment crisis and cannot compete with the other local public and private options. Other Catholic high schools in the area are thriving, and the nearby public high school options, with the exception of Bridgeport, report excellent statistics in offerings, graduation rates and college placement (U.S. News and World Report, 2021). While Bridgeport does not, there are a number of specialized magnet and charter high school options with better rankings that cost less than Notre Dame.

Principle Cipriani indicates that this amalgamation of offerings in the local area often leaves Notre Dame either undesirable or unaffordable, leading to their enrollment crisis.

Methods

The research questions were investigated through a 25-question survey with two qualifying questions to assess whether the respondent would be a good fit for the survey. The respondents were required to have at least one child between the ages of 12-28 such that they would be within a reasonable time horizon to the high school selection process, and live within 30 minutes of Notre Dame – Fairfield such that it would be a reasonable option to consider for their child.

The survey was created using the Qualtrics software provided by Vanderbilt University and respondents were reached utilizing the snowball technique, relying heavily on personal outreach, social media posting and email blasts.

The survey was open for three weeks and yielded 88 usable responses.

Project Questions

Do "school quality" factors: academic rigor, college selection, school safety, faith based education and extra-curricular offerings impact interest in school enrollment for families in the towns surrounding Fairfield, Connecticut?

How might local parent perceptions of Notre Dame High School in Fairfield, CT impact interest in enrollment?

What kinds of people select Catholic high schools in Fairfield County?

Findings

RQ # 1

Top 3 School Quality (SQ) Factors OVERALL

- Academic Rigor/College Placement
- Elective Offerings
- Financial Considerations

Catholic-identifying parents are the target demographic and have identical SQ rankings

Parents who actually select Catholic High School

- Values Education & Social Factors in the top 3 rather than Electives & Financial Considerations
- #1 Academic Rigor/College Placement stayed constant

Notre Dame High School Parents

- Academic Rigor/College Placement didn't rank within the Top 3
- Only subgroup with Athletics in Top 3

RQ # 2

Catholic parents think other local Catholic School options are better than Notre Dame

Catholic parents perceive Notre Dame's strengths as:

- Academic Rigor
- Values Education
- School Tradition/Spirit

Values Education is 5th and School Tradition/Spirit is 10th in terms of importance for these parents

Catholic parents perceive Notre Dame's struggles as:

- Academic Rigor
- Electives & Specialized Courses
- Financial/Economic

These are the same as top 3 most important SQ Factors

Knowledge and perception formation are occurring within social communities or independently

RQ # 3

Catholic High School parents are primarily **managers, educators and business people** who serve in mostly **middle management positions or above**

Non Catholic High School parents have a **wider variety of professions and leveling** within the workplace

Hobbies were not **noticeably different** - all parents enjoy many of the same activities

Non-Catholic School parents reported knowing **more friends, family members or associates who attended their child's school**

Catholic-identified parents reported **receiving information** about high schools from **within their social spheres** but didn't know as many people who attended

Recommendations

Update Academic Programming

Increased academic rigor and success will attract parents who value these factors while influencing college placement positively, another priority factor

International Baccalaureate (IB) Program is a unique opportunity as no other Catholic High School in the area provides this offering

Values education important to target demographic, IB program provides ethical and service focus

Increase Focus on Priority School Quality Factors

Focus efforts exclusively on target demographic priorities with the understanding that current parents have other priorities, provide balance

Highlight priority bright spots:

- Feature college placement in marketing
- Offer elective opportunities for younger prospective students with buddy system for service/values focus
- Specialized academic opportunities in the summer

Community Perception Formation

Focus on creating robust, easily accessible and attractive online content for prospective parents to access

Video tours, achievement highlights, press releases, social media posting and attractive photography

Adopt a story-telling marketing approach for word-of-mouth communication within groups in the community. Focus on person-first, SQ-factor priority driven narratives

Dedications

To my sweet girl, Grace Ann, I started this paper while I was pregnant with you, unable to hold anything down - taking a break to get sick between every paragraph. I am finishing this paper listening to your laughter echo across the room and your little feet run across the hardwood floor. Being your mama is the greatest joy of my life. Always remember: you can do hard things.

To my mom and dad, thank you for instilling within me the value of hard work. And for the many, many conversations and experiences throughout my life that developed my thinking, my motivation, and my grit. Your unwavering love and support are the foundation of my being.

To “the sisters”, Amanda, Laura Kate, and Allison, I am endlessly thankful for your friendship, love, and support. You inspire me, motivate me, and keep me grounded.

To the wonderful friends who stuck by my side when I was in thick of it, forgiving me repeatedly and without judgement for unanswered calls and rescheduled plans – you are the best.

To my advisors, Dr. Cindy Nebel and Dr. Justine Bruyère, my Sacred Heart co-workers, especially Human Resources, Vandy Team Jellybean, and the many, many brilliant individuals that I have had the privilege of working with: thank you for sharing your brilliance, and for your motivation and support.

“Nothing great is ever achieved without much enduring.” – St. Catherine of Siena

Organization Context

Notre Dame High School is a Catholic high school located in Fairfield, CT. The school serves grades 9-12 and costs \$15,750 annually for tuition, which is on the low end for private high school education in the area according to principal, Chris Cipriani. There are approximately 600 students, all of whom reside locally. While students live in close proximity, the local towns have very different community atmospheres. The principal noted in our conversation, “some students are the children of those who clean the building, and some are the children of those who own the building,” which is a direct reflection of the differences within the surrounding towns.

For context, the school is located almost exactly on the town line between Bridgeport, CT and Fairfield, CT, both of which are situated within the larger entity of Fairfield County. Fairfield County is comprised of 32 towns and cities, and is the wealthiest county in the state, with a median household income of \$90,645 as compared to \$78,444 state-wide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). It is home to the top seven richest towns in CT, while also being home to Bridgeport, the poorest city in the state. With a median household income of \$46,662 and more than 20% of residents living below the poverty line (compared to 9% in Fairfield County overall) affording a school like Notre Dame is out of reach for many families in Bridgeport (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). To be clear, the striking wealth seen in the Fairfield County is in spite of the low Bridgeport numbers they include, meaning that the surrounding wealth is enough to outweigh Bridgeport’s poverty so significantly that the county is still the richest overall in the state.

In the surrounding area, there are many private schools and Notre Dame is one of a number of religiously affiliated schools. The school serves families in the area who are interested in sending their children to a private school with a Catholic mission and as compared to other offerings, an affordable price tag. There are just over 50 staff members who serve in the roles of

teachers, guidance counselors, admissions officers, and support staff. These individuals, along with the students, their families and the alumni of the school are passionate about the expansion and health of their community. As such, my work with them is meant to investigate, assist, and inform positive changes within the school community with an expansion and growth focused mindset.

Problem of Practice

While Notre Dame has a strong sense of purpose and community, the principal, Chris Cipriani expressed that the school is facing an enrollment crisis and cannot compete with the other local public and private schools. For example, St. Joseph High School, a neighboring Catholic school, is situated about 7 miles east of Notre Dame on a beautiful 57-acre campus, serving more than 800 students while boasting a 100% graduation and college placement rate (St. Joseph's Admissions Viewbook, 2020). They offer a large number of sports teams and clubs along with college level classes, AP courses and specialized classes such as robotics, engineering, and mandarin (Carney, Sandoe and Associates, 2020). While their budget information is inaccessible, the publicized images of beautiful remodeling, upgrades, and additions to their campus facilities leads to the belief that they are likely are not currently encountering much financial difficulty. They rank 5th of the 21 Catholic high schools in the state as compared to Notre Dame's ranking at 18th (US News and World Report, 2021).

In addition, both public high school options in Fairfield report 98-99% graduation rate, ranking 15th and 32nd within the state and among the top 1,500 schools nationally, among 12 others in the county that rank as highly (U.S. News and World Report, 2021). On the other hand, the three standard high schools in the city of Bridgeport report less than 70% graduation rates, well below the state median, all sitting between 10,000-17,000 nationally. There are, however, a

number of specialized magnet and charter high school options in Bridgeport, most of which run on a lottery system or application process, reporting higher graduation rates but still falling well beneath the neighboring Fairfield rankings.

Principal Cipriai indicates that this amalgamation of offerings in the local area often leaves Notre Dame either undesirable or unaffordable for some. They do not have the same rankings, facilities or offerings as St. Joseph or the Fairfield High Schools, and parents in Bridgeport are more likely to try their luck in the lottery or admissions system for a charter or magnet school in the area due to cost, especially because these schools offer specialized programs Notre Dame does not.

Cipriani believes that if Notre Dame increases academic rigor, it will strengthen their reputation and shift the community perception such that they will be considered a premier Catholic high school in the area, which they hope, in turn, will lead to increased enrollment. They hope to do this while continuing to promote a strong sense of inclusion and community. This problem is critical to the health of the school, as well as the future of the school. Further, it is important for current students to be engaging in rigorous coursework such that they are able to access colleges or next steps of their choice, which also reflects well on the school. Lastly, the importance of quality Catholic education for those who wish to access it is a strong driving factor here as related to the impact and service the school provides to the community.

Background of Problem

After seventy years of Archdiocesan secondary schools existing in St. Louis County, Missouri, the only remaining Catholic high school, Trinity, closed its doors for the last time at the end of the 2021 academic year (Bernhard, 2021). Following a glowing athletic record complete with state championships as recent as 2019, in Fall 2021, only 37 freshmen were slated

to enroll. Trinity survived numerous mergers in the last 70 years, the last of which occurred in 2003, consolidating three area Catholic high schools. In the more recent years, five of their feeder elementary schools have also closed, and after many failed attempts to strategically position Trinity to stabilize and survive, they experienced the most significant enrollment decline in the last 50 years, forcing the closure. This is only 5 years after the second to last remaining Catholic high school in the county closed its doors in 2017.

Apparent by the numerous school closures, St. Louis County Catholic school enrollment dropped significantly, 22%, in the last ten years (Bernhard, 2021), and they are not alone. More than 200 of the United States of America's approximately 6,000 Catholic schools have closed in 2021 alone, having started the 2020-2021 academic year with a 6.4% decline in enrollment, equating to more than 111,000 students nation-wide, marking the most significant yearly decline since the seventies (Crary, 2021; Lovett, 2021). While one could suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced this deterioration, it can only be said to have exacerbated preexisting issues and an ongoing downturn (Campa, 2021). Other examples include the 44 Catholic elementary schools and four high schools closed in Philadelphia by 2012 (Trollinger, 2019), not unlike the seven in New York City during 2019 alone (Dolan, 2019), coupled with an 8% enrollment decrease in 2021. Unlike St. Louis, however, New York and Philadelphia remain in the top five for enrollment country-wide (National Catholic Education Association, 2021) highlighting that even the strongest cities are suffering concerning declines.

Coined the "Catholic School Crisis" by some (Campa, 2021; Filteau, 2012; Trollinger, 2019) enrollment in Catholic schools, both primary (Botts, 2017) and secondary has been steadily declining since 1965 (Trollinger, 2019). This crisis is evident in the drop of 3.7 million students and closure of more than 7,000 schools between 1965 and 2018 (Trollinger, 2019).

After what appeared to be a promising surge between 1960-1965, Catholic schools saw a decline of 1.2 million students between 1965-1970, coupled with the closure of nearly 2,000 schools (2019). This was followed by lack of recovery and further decline to present day, represented in the comparison of 5.5 million students and 13,292 Catholic schools in 1965 versus 1.8 million students enrolled in 6,280 Catholic schools in 2018. Hopes for “rebound” (Associated Press, 2021; Berger, 2021) exist, but success in doing so is sparse.

Literature Review

Secondary school choice is an often-worrisome decision for families across the country. With specialized schools, social groups, academics, the arts, religion, and sports to consider- the decision is often not an easy one. To better understand declining enrollment in Catholic schools across the nation, first I will share the available literature about the process by which parents select a secondary school: motivating factors, tuition and cost, and faith and values. Then, I will turn to the literature exploring the formation and utilization of school perception, and the role of “social networks and informal information gathering and exchanges” (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 1) that occur during the school selection process. The goal of this literature review is to better understand the motivations and deeply embedded social norms and understandings that influence school choice decisions, such that actionable steps to remedy the decline can be enacted.

Motivating Factors in the School-Choice Decision Making Process

Oftentimes, parents feel overwhelmed, even worried, when confronted with the task of choosing between the various secondary school options, public, private, religiously affiliated, charter, vocation, and magnet, among others. Rankings for academic rigor and college placement play a large role in high school selection, but the decision is not as simple as selecting a school

with good rankings. Instead, parents are often influenced by an amalgamation of factors motivated by their goals, values, and beliefs (NAIS, 2019; Bott, 2017).

Given the academic and future-oriented nature of high school, it would seem reasonable to presuppose that academics and college placement would rank highest in the selection criteria for families, and the research supports this assumption (Bott, 2017; Gasper, 2019; Wodon, 2019). In fact, both parents and children agree on the importance of academics and college placement (Gasper, 2019), and this value is not specific to Catholic school or non-Catholic school families (Wodon, 2019). Instead, the process by which parents and families select a secondary school goes beyond simply valuing a good academic environment.

When considering the factors contributing to school selection, one must reflect on the role that schools play in a child's life. Parental goals for children along with student abilities also factor into the 'jobs' that school will play. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) explored critical factors for school selection by first identifying "jobs" that parents expect a school to fulfill for their child (NAIS, 2019). NAIS suggests that when an expected "job" is not being fulfilled, parents then 'fire' schools and add this unfulfilled expectation to their 'hire' expectations for the next school. In doing so parents reveal what is critically important to them in school choice. One could, therefore, posit some parents may not even know the 'jobs' they value until the job is not being done. The 'jobs to be done' frame makes a case for families who either bring with them or develop intersecting motivations and values related to school choice. These junctions greatly influence school choice as parents often cannot hire a school for all of the jobs. Take for example parent A, parent A believes that their child's school provides students with after school support. After a short time, parent A discovers that after school peer mentoring exists, but after school academic support is not included in tuition, and their child is

being bullied in the program. This shifts parent A's priorities to include both a positive social and a supportive academic environment for their child. In this example, the parent may believe the school is failing their child even though one of the hire expectations was filled and as a result fire the school. Eventually, parent A may select a different school to meet their new and unmet needs. Parents who desire admission to top colleges and parents who value emotional maturity or social emotional development may also hire or fire schools based on these values and expectations (NAIS, 2019). These various priorities may simultaneously render tuition cost or distance from home more or less important, and also result in hiring or firing. Applying the 'jobs to be done' tool to Catholic education paints a picture of possible reasons Catholic families may 'hire' Catholic schools. These families seek a faith based educational experience, with strong values, moral curriculum, and a community atmosphere. Many Catholic families are hiring for reasons beyond academics (Wodon, 2021). In fact, Catholic families have indicated that other factors such as extracurricular offerings, respect (Puccio, 2000) and dedicated high quality teachers (Harsh, 2018) weigh heavily on school choice. As one would expect, families who value academics over a faith-based experience tend to lean toward non-Catholic options (Bott, 2017; NAIS, 2019).

While it is clear that academic rigor and college placement are important factors for all families in their high school selection process, these factors play a less significant role in the larger picture of Catholic school selection. Instead, a complex web of important (and often faith centered) elements influence the decision-making. Given the unique offerings of a Catholic setting, including values and faith, which will be further explored in future sections of this literature review, interrogation of other factors in the selection process is warranted.

Faith & Values

With the knowledge that Catholic school families consider factors beyond academics and college placement, further attention can be given to the “values, preferences, child rearing practices, social networks and aspirations” that Catholic school families consider in their decision-making process (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). It is critical to consider the effect of religiosity on school selection, particularly Catholic school (Cohen-Zada & Sander, 2007). From the research, it would seem Catholic-identified families drive the demand for Catholic schools, and being Catholic, including the practice of attending religious services, increases the chances that a family will send their child to a Catholic school (Cohen-Zada & Sander, 2007). By comparison, non-religiously affiliated families more frequently select secular options (such as secular private school) when choosing secondary schools (Cohen-Zada & Sander, 2007). One explanation may be that Catholics have more favorable perceptions of Catholic education, while viewing public options less favorably (Wodon 2019). Catholic school families also indicate placing higher importance on moral and character education than non-Catholic school families, along with worship and religious education (Bott, 2017). Options like general moral and character education often do exist in public schools, but are seen as less important in the eyes of non-Catholic school families. This is combined with the fact that Catholic-specific worship and religious education are typically not offered in public school. Even with similar core values in academic rigor and college placement, families who desire Catholic-specific education must turn to Catholic school to satisfy these desires.

Selection, though, is not limited to the faith aspects of learning, it also flows into student values and conduct as Catholic school families indicate this is of importance to them, as well (Bott, 2017). This is further reflected in the representation of value placed on teacher-quality by

Catholic school parents, who seemingly believe that teachers are primarily responsible for the integration of values and faith-based education in the classroom (Kennedy et al., 2011). The expectation is that education as related to Catholic values goes beyond a certain curriculum and is instead integrated into all interactions within the school.

Beyond the content of curriculum, enforcement of behavior in the classroom and throughout school is often moderated by an honor code or code of conduct. While not standard across the board, Catholic schools have more freedom to set their policies and procedures than public schools, who typically have more standardly set, legally regulated codes of conduct (Philippe et al., 2017). Catholic school policies include severe behaviors also included in the public school policies but go further to include issues of decorum which are generally less severe and non-violent such as chewing gum. Many also include pregnancy, public displays of affection, and off campus behavior that reflects negatively, and in doing so, they seemingly exercise stricter control over their students outside of what is typical or required such as harassment, cutting class, or fighting. These expectations may be preferable to Catholic parents who care about curbing these seemingly values-based behaviors in their children as a result of how their faith and culture intersect with their desired personal image and social expectations.

Tuition and Cost

As one would expect, the cost of secondary school weighs considerably on parents and families in their decision-making process. Families may desire to send their child to a Catholic high school, but affordability can situate itself as a core deciding factor. For families whose priority is sending their child to a private school, the Catholic option is often thought of as the most affordable as compared to non-Catholic private school options. For example, the school at the center of this project, Notre Dame-Fairfield charges \$15,750 yearly, as compared to Easton

Country Day school, located less than 5 miles away that charges \$34,500 yearly (eastoncountryday.org, 2023), making the Catholic option more attractive to parents whose primary value is private education but are constrained by cost (Cheng et al., 2016). This, however, is a unique circumstance, and many parents are instead deciding between all local offerings. For these families, the cost of tuition plays a large role. Gasper indicates that nearly 75% of families who elected a non-Catholic option for high school (after having attended a Catholic elementary school) cited tuition expense as their primary reason for leaving the Catholic system. Of these families, those with the highest income were most likely to be retained, followed by those with the lowest. The most susceptible to leaving were the middle-income families who do not make enough to cover the cost but also do not qualify for financial assistance. This strain has only become more exacerbated over time. Given that a majority of Catholic schools are funded almost entirely by tuition, the rising cost of operation coupled with decreasing enrollment results in the need to charge more in tuition, which is evident in Catholic high school tuition increasing nationwide at a rate of 136% between 2003-2013 (Gasper, 2019). This makes Catholic school unaffordable for many families.

More money means more capacity for choice and as such, Catholic schools are more likely to remain open in affluent areas (Trollinger, 2019). Often times, these schools cater to this population's distinct desires. In doing so, they offer an experience similar to high-end private schools. Though, as Cheng et al. (2016) noted, at a lower cost making it an affordable option for people with higher income, while remaining financially unreasonable for others (Gasper, 2019) especially those with multiple children (Bott, 2017). Even if these families can afford to send one child, the cost of multiple tuitions without significant financial assistance renders them incapable of providing the experience for all their children.

Perception

The Role of an Optimal Environment in School Selection

It has been suggested that improvement of perception may be the key to solving the Catholic school enrollment crisis (Bott, 2017). The way in which parents come to know and understand schools is critical to understanding their choice and fundamental to the ability to manage enrollment (Bott, 2017). It is a key factor to ensuring a future for Catholic schools (Wodon, 2019). Research suggests that the perceptions of family and friends can be extremely influential in secondary school selection with a large majority of parents indicating that a positive reputation among family, friends and other parents can be a determining factor in school choice (Bott, 2017). Thus, it is prudent to consider the ways in which Catholic schools are perceived now and what improvements can be made.

Some scholars suggest that the perception of Catholic schools remains positive, having long been known for favorable academic outcomes (Wodon, 2019) while others highlight the idea that in some communities, the public school option is rated higher by parents (Bott, 2017). Though, Catholic school students have proven over time to outperform their peers who attend other types of schools in the areas of high school graduation, 4-year college graduation rate, GPA, and likelihood of earning a STEM degree (Fleming, Lavertu and Crawford, 2018). The vehicle by which this occurs is unclear, however, often being associated with religion or perhaps an extension of religion rooted in a strong motivation to work hard breeding a “college going culture.” While it may be suggested that this success is rooted somehow in religion, it does not uphold across all religiously affiliated schools and seems to be situated solely among Catholic schools. This success is positive for Catholic schools but does not necessarily ring true in the perceptions of all parents (Bott, 2017) and further, even if it did, academic rigor and success is

not necessarily the sole determining factor for parents and families who are motivated by differentiated goals and values (NAIS, 2019), which are also influenced by perceptions.

Another facet of the school environment that is influenced by perception is optimum learning environment as it pertains to class size, school size, and orderliness (Peterson, 2003). Scholars do not necessarily agree on the most effective class size. Some research indicates that smaller sizes lead to better test scores, increased student engagement and teacher retention (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014). Interestingly, however, other studies suggest that smaller class sizes are more effective only in the case of low-quality teachers, and no optimum number has been identified (Peterson, 2003). Regardless of the conflicting research, parents and families are not conflicted and clearly prefer smaller class sizes and smaller school sizes in general. In addition to this, very similarly, research does not provide a consensus on optimum balance for discipline and orderliness in terms of strict or relaxed environment (Peterson, 2003). Some parents rank an orderly environment as a lower priority than academics, finances, and reputation (Bott, 2017) but, when presented with questions about safety, indicate a higher level of importance (Gasper, 2019). In general, however, parents seem to value a disciplined environment over a non-disciplined, more relaxed environment regardless of whether it has an impact on optimum performance (Peterson, 2003). Further, parents of children in private school believe their schools are maintaining a more orderly environment than public school parents believe of their schools. However, may be a double-edged sword for Catholic schools. Catholic school parents indicate high importance in this area (Bott, 2017) and therefore, Catholic schools are attracting parents for whom this is a priority. This does not mean, however, that simply because public school parents hold the perception that public schools are not

maintaining an orderly environment that they therefore would seek to select a Catholic school, as this may not be a priority for them.

What seems surmisable from the review of this literature is that these perceptions likely change from town to town and city to city, similar to the way they seem to conflict within the view of parents. Yet, for the Catholic school struggling with enrollment, understanding their unique positioning among the other options in their area along with the expressed needs and goals of the parents they serve would provide critical insight into their specific areas of opportunity.

Formation of Perception

One might wonder how parents form high school perceptions and acquire information about schools. The lyrics “I heard it through the grapevine” from a popular song by Marvin Gay may shine a light on at least one way of informing parent school perceptions. Ball and Vincent (1998) studied the “grapevine” and the structures and processes for how knowledge is disseminated in communities and the way perceptions are formed, all of which typically occur within a socially constructed sphere complete with elements of privilege, class, and capital. It seems to be highly educated mothers who most often seek opportunities for their children that are specific to their needs (Poikolainen, 2012), pointing to higher levels of scrutiny and choice behavior in this population. Other researchers have also indicated that parents with higher levels of education, income, and participation in their children’s schooling are more likely to participate in choosing. This is juxtaposed, however, with parents who have lower levels of education and in non-dominant ethnic groups who express the desire to have the ability to choose for their child, but who are not as likely to actually participate in choosing (Poikolainen, 2012). These parents likely also fall into the category of individuals who find tuition unaffordable. It would seem,

given the social nature of these perceptions, rooted in community and relationships, along with the financial realities of choice, that school selection is tightly bound to identity. The structures and processes for how knowledge is disseminated in communities and the way perceptions are formed, occurring within a socially constructed sphere, are inextricably intertwined with elements of privilege, class, and capital (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

In many cases, the grapevine may be influencing perception for years before a parent or family is engaging in school choice. While no one appears to be immune to the impact of the grapevine, Poikolainen (2012) found that some parents felt little need to explore alternate options for school outside of the public option if the parent had developed a previously held belief that the public school was sufficient enough, rendering other non-public options unable to compete for positive perception, as there is no interest in learning about them. However, from an economist's standpoint, the ability to choose and exercise choice breeds satisfaction (Peterson, 2003). An interesting question to ask parents who did not participate in the choosing process, but instead assumed their public school was "good enough" would be: are you satisfied? Research indicates that likely, they are less satisfied than their counterparts who exercised choice and elected a different option, in this case, a private school. It is unclear why or how this occurs, but it is clear that choice produces satisfaction in both the short and long term.

This provides further insight into the elements and personal characteristics that influence perceptions and choice, while balanced with the knowledge that perceptions and attitudes, as seen here, do not necessarily match with action or choice. This, and the other literature, bring to light the idea that those who participate in choosing and the social formation of the perceptions that influence their selection is not formulaic but rather, an amalgamation of identities, values,

aspirations and other, less tangible, personal characteristics and social patterns, which is reflected quite similarly in the motivating factors for school choice.

Conceptual Frame

In this research, I will use social identity theory to both deconstruct and better understand Catholic secondary school choice. This lens, which notes identity and worth are based on membership in a particular affinity group (Gee, 2001), will provide perspective and insight to help Notre Dame High School best recruit and attract students. Social identity theory is linked to a person's self-concept. In this case, school choice (specifically Catholic secondary school choice) is deeply embedded in both student and parent self-concept. Gee (2001) coins this self-concept as being a "certain kind of person" which is built around four perspectives of how identity is formed: (1) the nature perspective which are often elements of identity simply existing within oneself and become recognized; (2) the institutional perspective which is interwoven with power by having been deemed or granted such an identity through an authority of some sort; (3) the discursive perspective which is the formation of an identity through discourse and dialog, ascribing traits of a person based on perception or prior knowledge of their behavior, further reinforcing said trait or behavior through external treatment by others; and (4) the affinity perspective which is rooted within practices a person partakes in among others based on a set of interests which form social practices and group affiliations. These perspectives, while described separately, are interconnected in the formation and sustention of identity.

Social identity is the formation of how a person identifies as within or outside of a group with some value or significance placed on membership (Hogg, 2001). These groups only exist as a result of people operating in relation to one another, and in doing so, creating, demonstrating, and perpetuating values and social meaning. These groups and the people within them strive to

enhance and protect the positive qualities of their group. Therefore, people who identify with certain socially developed values seek membership into certain insulated groups. This process, when people categorize themselves and others based on membership or affiliation, is known as social categorization (Hogg, 2001). Social categorization often results in in-groups and out-groups which further perpetuates the similarities and differences among those who belong to and who are outside of the group.

Social identity theory, identity formation perspectives, and social categorization provide an important frame for this research, helping me as I critically consider the motivating factors for secondary school selection among parents whose geographic location would allow for selection of Notre Dame High School, as well as their perception of Notre Dame High School.

Research Questions

1. Do "school quality" factors: academic rigor, college selection, school safety, faith-based education and extra-curricular offerings impact interest in school enrollment for families in the towns surrounding Fairfield, Connecticut?
2. How might local parent perceptions of Notre Dame High School in Fairfield, CT impact interest in enrollment?
3. What kinds of people select Catholic high schools in Fairfield County?

Project Design

Methods & Data Collection

The research questions were investigated through a 25-question survey. The survey began with two qualifying questions to assess whether the respondent would be a good fit for the survey. The first asked if they had a child between the ages of 12-28 such that they would be within a reasonable time horizon to the high school selection process, and the second asked if

they lived within 30 minutes of Notre Dame such that it would be a reasonable option to consider for their child. If they answered no to either of the questions, they would be redirected to a ‘thank you’ page and exit the survey. If the respondent answered both questions affirmatively, they then responded to 13 demographic and personal or familial related questions. Subsequent to this, the respondents were brought to the portion of the survey related to each research question: one question for research question one, five questions for research question two and six questions for research question three (see Appendix A)

The survey questions were designed to answer the three research questions specifically, and were carefully worded in an effort to aid in the triangulation of considerations for the following: school quality factors and prioritization of importance for parents as related to high school selection and the high school experience (Bott, 2017; Gasper, 2021; Harsh, 2018 ; Puccio, 2000), parent perceptions and formation of such perceptions (Bott, 2017), and what “kind of people” select Catholic high school (Gee, 2001).

The survey was created using the Qualtrics software provided by Vanderbilt University. Respondents were reached utilizing the snowball technique – I initially contacted the principal of Notre Dame High School to ask if he and the diocesan superintendent would send the survey out to their constituents. Receipt of the email request was confirmed, but I never received confirmation that the survey was shared with their channels or constituents. Then, I personally reached out to individuals I was aware would fit the criteria and asked for them to both complete the survey themselves and disseminate it to friends and family who would fit the criteria. Following this, over the course of two weeks, I utilized Facebook and typed in each town within 30 driving minutes of Notre Dame High School along with a list of other terms including: “CT parents”, “parents”, “CT moms/dads”, “moms/dads page”, “community board”, “community

bulletin”, “high school”, “mamas” and “parents”. If the search of those terms yielded a page result that would lend itself to members of the target population for this study, I attempted to make a post requesting respondents (See Appendix B). Some of the posts were visible immediately and others required approval by the administrators of the group. If the group page appeared closely aligned with the target population but the post was not initially approved, I made a second attempt by directly messaging the administrators of the group requesting assistance disseminating the survey. I also reached out to the social media marketing and enrollment management coordinator for Notre Dame - Fairfield, Karen, to request specific assistance in yielding respondents of color as the response rate appeared very low while the survey was open and at the conclusion of the response period. Karen indicated that they would look into providing a list of parents, either current, prospective or alumni, highlighting parents of color to reach out to directly, but she was unsure if they were allowed to provide this list to me. Ultimately, I was unable to access a list of any kind from Notre Dame to make outreach.

The survey was open beginning May 1, 2023, through May 22, 2023, and yielded 88 usable responses.

Data Analysis

Demographics

92% of respondents reported identifying as white, 3% as Latino or Hispanic, 2% as native Hawaiian, 1% as two or more ethnicities, 1% as other or unknown, and 0% of respondents reported identifying as African American, Asian, or Native American. It should be noted that at the beginning of the survey period, May 1st, the option for African American was present on the survey, but on May 20th I noticed that the option was missing from the selection and re-added it through the close of the survey on May 22nd. After carefully analyzing the responses to

determine how much of an impact this had on responses, I found that no one quit the survey after this question. All respondents who made it to the “please specify your ethnicity” question answered it and moved on to the next question and only 1% of the respondents indicated “other” as their race, even while the option was missing. As such, I determined that it was likely the question was only missing for a short window of time and no African American respondents took the survey.

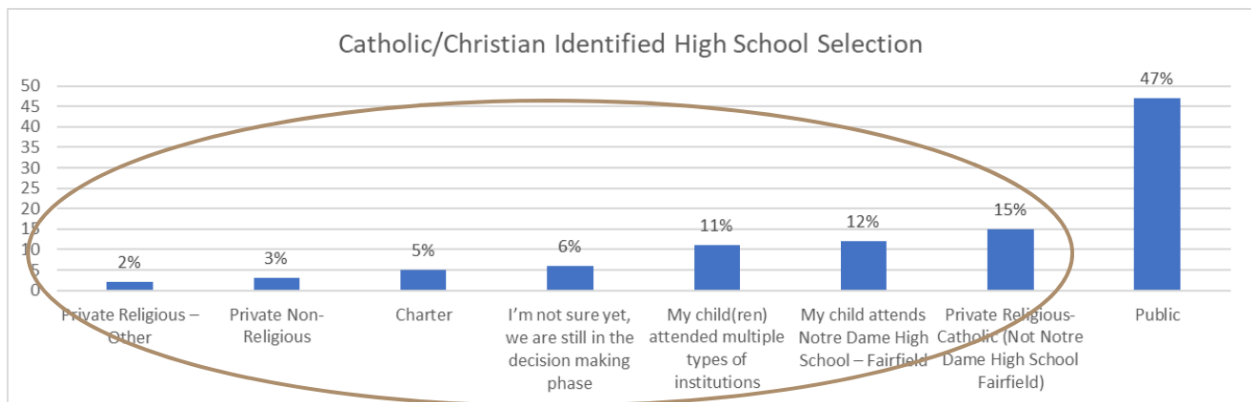
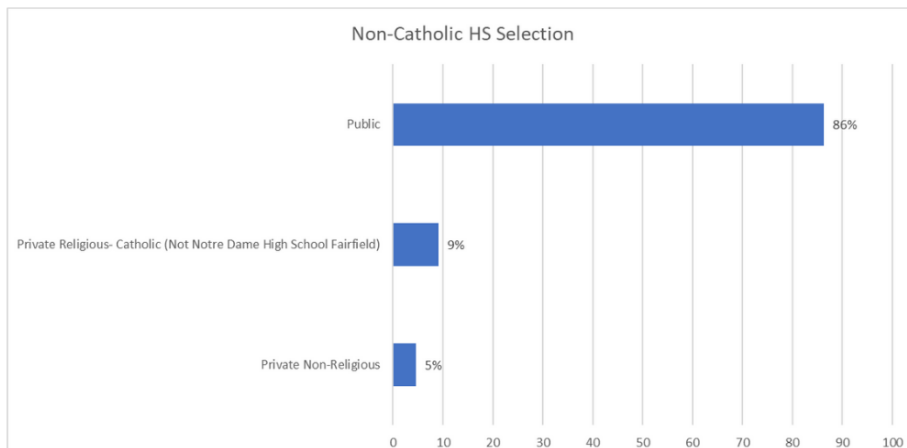
78% of respondents reported being between the ages of 41-60, while 22% responded as being 40 and below or 61 and above. 90% of respondents were women as compared to 10% who reported identifying as a man. 98% reported being married and 90% reported that both parents obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher versus 10% reporting some high school, high school diploma or trade school. 63% reported having a household income above \$100,000 versus 37% below \$100,000.

A focal point of this study is related to Catholicism, and thus, the demographics for religion are important to note. 75% of respondents reported identifying as Catholic or Christian, herein referred to as Catholic, 15% reported Judaism, 1% reported Islam and 9% indicated they would prefer not to say.

Findings

In an attempt to strategically triangulate the data in such a way that the findings would render meaningful conclusions, I began by investigating religious identification and high school selection. I directly compared Catholic parents to other parents and found that Catholic identified parents have more variety in their high school selection as compared to non-Catholic identified parents. Non-Catholic parents mainly select public schools at 86% and when they do not select public schools, they report selecting Catholic schools or private non-religious schools at a

combined 14% but not charter schools, private religious-other schools, or multiple types of institutions. This is as compared to Catholic identified parents who select public schools at only 47% while selecting a variety of schools including Catholic schools, charter schools, private non-religious schools, private religious-other schools, and multiple types of institutions for their children at a combined 53% of the time. Being that only 9% non-Catholic parents reported selecting a Catholic school versus 27% of Catholic parents, and only 14% of non-Catholic parents report selecting something other than the public option as compared to 53% for Catholic identified parents, Catholic identified parents present in the data as the most fruitful demographic for potentially increasing enrollment at Notre Dame-Fairfield and as such, became the focus for triangulating the data throughout analysis.



Research Question 1: Do "school quality" factors: academic rigor, college selection, school safety, faith-based education and extra-curricular offerings impact interest in school enrollment for families in the towns surrounding Fairfield, Connecticut?

To determine what school quality factors were most important to parents when considering high school selection for their child or children, survey respondents were asked to select their top three factors in high school selection from the following list:

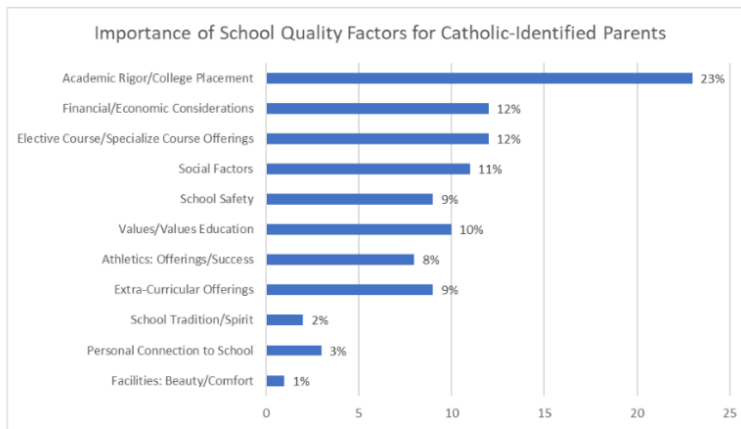
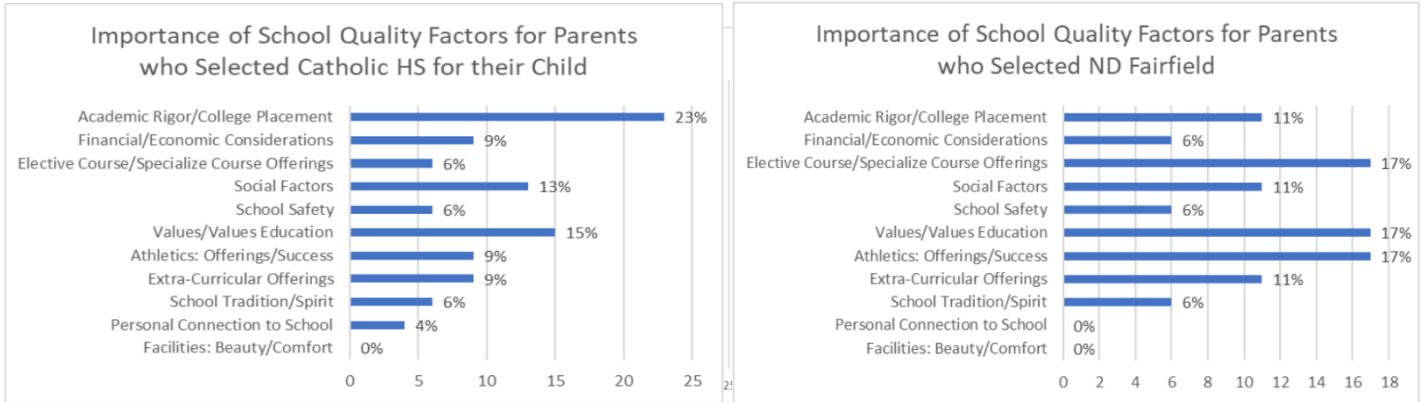
- Academic Rigor/College Placement
- Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language)
- School Safety
- Extra-Curricular Offerings: (Academic, Social, Special Interest)
- Athletics: Offerings/Success
- Facilities: Beauty/Comfort
- Values/Values Education
- School Tradition/Spirit
- Social Factors: My Child will have friends/community, Personal Connection to School: Parent is alum, Friends attend/attended, etc.,
- Financial/Economic Considerations.

Parents ranked Academic Rigor first, Elective Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language) second and Financial Considerations third. This was expected as the literature pointed to the central importance of academics and college placement (Bott, 2017; Gasper, 2019; Wodon, 2019), as well as the idea that financial and economic considerations can, at times, make or break the decision for a parent as they simply are unable to even consider some secondary school options if they are financially unattainable (Gasper, 2019), particularly with for those with multiple

children (Bott, 2017). This is evidenced in the data for parents with up to 3 children. As the number of children rose, the number of parents who indicated financial considerations to be within their top three factors also rose, but interestingly the trend does not reflect for parents with 4 or more children. 29% of parents with one child ranked financial considerations within their top three factors, 35% of parents with 2 children and 53% of parents with 3 children, supporting the idea that with more children, financial considerations become more salient. However, only 20% of parents with 4 children ranked financial considerations within their top three, though, the population for this number of children was much smaller in comparison to the rest, with only 5 respondents reporting having 4 or more children.

Being that the potential target demographic for Notre Dame-Fairfield is Catholic parents, as identified earlier, I next considered the same question but looked specifically at the responses for Catholic-identified parents who actually selected Catholic high school for their children. While parents who selected Catholic high school for their children still ranked Academic Rigor/College Placement first, consistent with the general parent population as well as Catholic-identified parents, however, they next valued Values Education and Social Factors. They ranked Financial/Economic Considerations 4th and Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language) 7th, a considerable difference than that of their general population and Catholic-identified peers. I then examined parents who selected Notre Dame for their children. These parents ranked Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language), Values/Values Education and Athletics: Offerings/Success equally as their first priority when considering school quality factors. They reported valuing Academic Rigor/College Placement and Extra-Curricular Offerings: (Academic, Social, Special Interest) as tied for 4th

along with social factors. It is the only population investigated here that does not rank Academic Rigor/College placement in their top three, differentiating themselves from even their Catholic-identified parent peers.

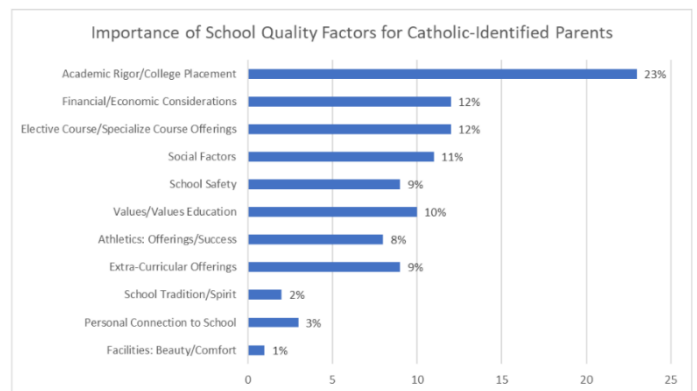
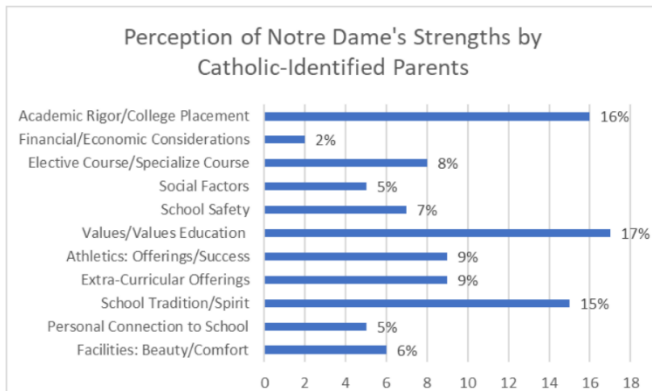


At first look, it appeared that most parents valued the same things in terms of school quality factors when considering the general parent population versus Catholic-identified parents. However, upon taking a deeper dive into the data, it is clear that there are variations in prioritization for different populations, particularly for parents who choose Catholic school for their children and Notre Dame parents specifically.

Research Question 2: How might local parent perceptions of Notre Dame High School in Fairfield, CT impact interest in enrollment?

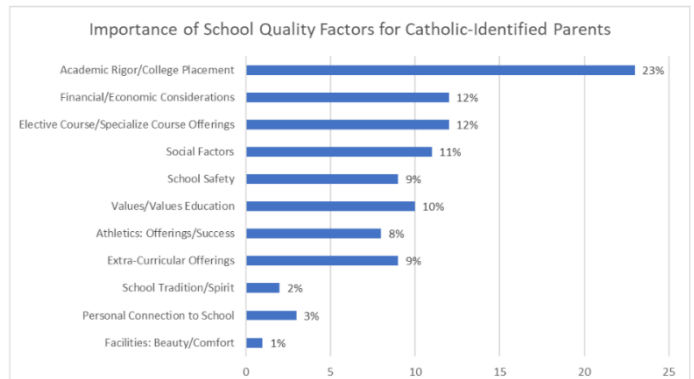
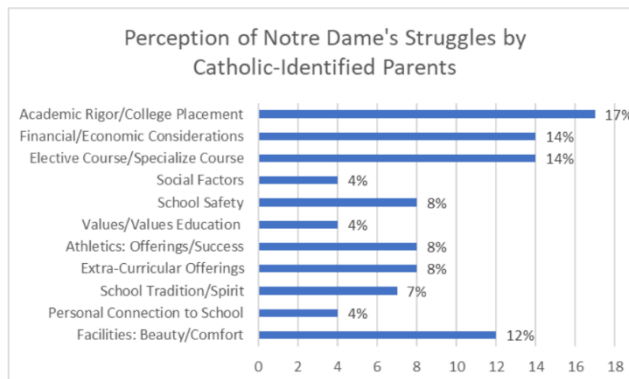
To provide specific recommendations for Notre Dame, following the investigation of school quality factors, I examined the perception of these factors in relation to Notre Dame by local parents. Here, the analysis was how each population viewed Notre Dame. I centered my analysis on the target enrollment population, as previously mentioned: Catholic identified parents.

Catholic-identified parents reported perceiving Notre Dame’s strengths as Values/Values Education, Academic Rigor/College Placement and School Tradition/Spirit. While Academic Rigor/College Placement is in the top three priorities for Catholic-identified parents in terms of school quality factors, Values/Values Education is 5th and School Tradition and Spirit is 10th.



Next, I looked at the factors that were perceived as struggles for Notre Dame.

Interestingly, Catholic-identified parents also reported perceiving Notre Dame as struggling with Academic Rigor/College Placement. This points to a discrepancy in perception within this



population. Some see it as a clear strength while others see it as a clear struggle. Catholic-identified parents also reported perceiving Notre Dame struggling primarily with Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language) and Financial/Economic Considerations, highlighting an interesting and important finding: the target population reports perceiving the top three struggles for Notre Dame to be identical to their top three priorities in terms of school quality factors. This information about perceptions begs the question of how these perceptions are formed. Focused again on the target population, I found that most perception formation is personally directed rather than by direct efforts by the school. 35% of parents report that they form their perceptions through word of mouth from other parents, friends, or alumni, 17% reported they engage in personal online research and 14% reported that their perceptions are formed through their child and their child's friends. While the schools may be able to control the material online that the parents can access through their own research, the remainder of perception formation appears to be occurring within the pre-established communities and relationships.

Research Question 3: What kinds of people select Catholic high schools in Fairfield County?

With the understanding that much of the perception formation happens within communities of people, and priorities as related to school quality factors vary among differing populations, I next turned to learning what “kinds” of people select Catholic high schools. This line of inquiry helps to provide important context in navigating the complexities present within the latent elements of communities, culture, identity, and social construction present within high school selection.

Looking specifically at parents who choose Catholic high schools, the data revealed that 27% work in management-type positions in the workforce, 19% are educators and 11% work in the business/financial sector with lower numbers in other types of professions. Most of these parents, 45%, report being middle managers and 35% report being upper management or above, meaning that an overwhelming majority, 81%, report they occupy positions above the general workforce. This is as compared to non-Catholic high school parents who report occupying a wider variety of professions and similar to Catholic high school parents, 74%, report being above the general workforce. Though, 10% report they are not involved in workplace hierarchy at all. While there is slight variation in terms of what parents reported related to their place in the workforce, nothing significant enough to make meaning.

Similarly, there is little variation in hobbies and interests between the populations. Both Catholic high school parents and non-Catholic high school parents indicated their top three hobbies and interests are travel, sports, and music.

Social identity theory posits that identity and worth are based on membership in a particular affinity group (Gee, 2001), which lends itself to the notion that secondary school selection is closely intertwined with identity, group membership, and community. As such, I investigated the data to understand whether family, friends, and close associates of the parents also had children who attended the school their child attends or attended. 68% of Catholic school parents responded yes and 32% responded no, as compared to non-Catholic school parents where 85% responded yes and 15% responded no. The discrepancy here may be due to the fact that a majority of non-Catholic school parents are public school parents who likely have natural, built in relationships in their neighborhoods, communities, and primary schools that Catholic school parents also have but do not translate to the secondary school they select for their child. It is

interesting, however, given the reported community-driven nature of perception formation that more Catholic school parents do not know someone who attended the school they selected for their child. In these cases, it would seem, their perceptions are being formed through non-affiliated third parties to the school rather than through a personal connection. This means that even if parents do not know someone directly who attends the school, there is still a strong enough perception formation outside of the direct school community to entice a non-affiliated parent to select the school.

In conclusion, I found the following:

Research Question #1

- Catholic-identified parents are Notre Dame's target demographic.
- All parents and Catholic-identified parents have the same top 3 school quality factors: academic rigor, financial considerations, and electives.
- Parents who selected a Catholic high school for their child ranked academic rigor, values education, and social factors as their top 3 school quality factors.
- Notre Dame parents were the only population who did not rank academic rigor in their top 3, and similar to Catholic-identified peers, included values education. However, they were also the only population to include athletics.

Research Question #2

- Catholic-identified parents perceive other Catholic school options as better than Notre Dame.
- Catholic-identified parents believe Notre Dame excels in academic rigor, values education, and school tradition, but they only rank academic rigor as one of their top three priorities.

- Catholic-identified parents believe their top three school quality factor priorities: academic rigor, financial considerations and electives are Notre Dame's top three struggles.
- There is a perception conflict among Catholic-identified parents as some believe academic rigor is a top strength for Notre Dame while others believe it is a top struggle.
- Knowledge and perception formation are occurring within social communities or independently.

Research Question #3

- Catholic High School parents are primarily managers, educators and business people who serve in mostly middle management positions or above.
- Non-Catholic High School parents have a wider variety of professions and leveling within the workplace.
- Hobbies of Catholic High School parents as compared to non-Catholic High School parents are not noticeably different.
- Non-Catholic School parents reported knowing more friends, family members or associates who attended their child's school.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Update academic programming to include specialized courses and increase perceived academic rigor.

When asked about perception of what Notre Dame struggles with, the target population of Catholic-identified parents listed Academic Rigor/College Placement, Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language) and Financial/Economic Considerations as the primary three struggles. As a critical point for consideration, the same

three factors were also the top three most important school quality factors for these parents. As such, it would benefit Notre Dame to take a multi-pronged approach to address this issue, which I recommend be the adoption of an all-encompassing, specialized academic program geared toward increasing rigor while remaining values-oriented.

The option I would recommend is the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, which is described as a program focused on cultivating “students who have excellent breadth and depth of knowledge—students who flourish physically, intellectually, emotionally and ethically” (ib.org, 2023). This is a good option for Notre Dame as these elements are also consistent with the infusion of values education, which Catholic school parents in general and Notre Dame parents identify as important to them. As such, it would speak to the priorities of both their current population of parents and their target population.

Additionally, the program focuses on curriculum that would extend into the specialized coursework areas that are of interest to their target population parents. The program identifies their curriculum to be focused on six subject groups: languages and literature, language acquisition, individuals and society, sciences, mathematics, and the arts. In addition, it calls for students to complete a theory of knowledge course with an extended essay assignment aimed at students developing “greater awareness of their personal and ideological assumptions, as well as developing an appreciation of the diversity and richness of cultural perspectives. Finally, it requires an outside of the classroom project or activity focused on “creativity, activity and/or service” (2023). This type of project is of great importance in the college application process (US News & World Report, 2023; College Board, 2023) and would lend itself to meeting that expressed interest from parents.

A significant consideration here, however, is the cost it would take for this program to be adopted and integrated at the school. Based on preliminary research with the information available online, it would cost the school approximately \$13,500 to adopt the program initially (ibo.org, 2023). Then, the school would need to pay for the exams for each student at a rate of approximately \$120 per student per exam plus an approximate \$150 “core” fee per student (2023). Should each student at Notre Dame pursue an IB diploma, they would be required to take 6 exams each plus their core requirements. This would require a total investment of \$870 per student to achieve the diploma.

First, I would suggest attempting to raise the funds to bring the program initially through a local and alumni donation campaign. Another option would be to seek assistance and partnership from Sacred Heart University, the college situated across the street, such that their education graduate students could participate in learning opportunities in teaching through the program. Should Sacred Heart assist in funding the founding of the program, Notre Dame would commit to providing learning opportunities to their graduate students through the program. This partnership may also entice Sacred Heart faculty and staff to explore Notre Dame as an option for their high school children, another avenue for increasing enrollment.

Second, I would suggest a three-pronged approach in tackling the ongoing cost: (1) dedicate a small portion of current tuition dollars; (2) lobby for a partnership with the diocese such that the dioceses would provide a portion of the funding, this would be beneficial to them as Notre Dame-Fairfield would establish a competitive advantage to the dioceses overall school offerings with the addition of the IB program and; (3) a slight increase in future tuition dollars. No other Diocese of Bridgeport high schools currently offer this program (Diocese of Bridgeport, 2023; ibo.org, 2023). Further, there are only 9 IB schools in the state and one

Catholic option, which is all-boys (ibo.org, 2023). As such, this is a significant area of opportunity for Notre Dame and the Dioceses of Bridgeport to attract students both to Catholic schools within the Dioceses and to Notre Dame specifically.

Of course, the IB program is not the only option. The purpose of this recommendation is to highlight the opportunity to provide increased academic rigor alongside a values-based education. This would attract new Catholic-identified parents who report valuing academic rigor highly while also satisfying current Catholic high school and Notre Dame high school parents who rank values education within their top 3 school quality factors. If another program fulfilled these same needs, then it could also be considered.

Recommendation #2: Focus on highlighting school-quality factors of importance for Catholic-identified parents.

The data presented a strong argument for the differentiated nature of prioritization of school quality factors in high school selection for different kinds of parents. As such, I recommend that Notre Dame-Fairfield focus heavily on the target demographic referenced throughout this paper: Catholic-identified parents, and tailor any goals, improvements, and marketing to meeting the needs of this population. This population ranks their top three school quality factors as Academic Rigor/College Placement first, Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language) second and Financial/Economic Considerations third. They also indicated that these were the top three perceived struggles for Notre Dame-Fairfield. While these are areas of opportunity (which Recommendation 1 desires to help address) there are certainly bright spots and current wins in these areas that can be highlighted to attract this population. Ideas include: (1) featuring students who achieved admission to highly ranked colleges or outstanding standardized test scores on social media, in the local paper and on the

website; (2) offering elective-type opportunities to upcoming populations of students (e.g., invite local middle school students to a science fair or create a buddy system between these middle school students and Notre Dame students such that they are working together on a co-authored science project with oversight from Notre Dame faculty, and (3) offering a week-long summer STEM, world languages or history exploration program for elementary aged children that charges summer camp-like tuition and can provide opportunity for Notre Dame faculty to participate and Notre Dame students to volunteer. Lastly, addressing the concern related to financial/economic considerations is difficult given the critical nature of tuition for Notre Dame's budget. The goal is instead to assist parents and families to see Notre Dame as a high-value option that is worth the financial/economic considerations at play rather than to reduce the cost, as reducing the cost is not a viable option for the financial health of the school.

Recommendation #3: Perception Formation in Community

A critical finding in this project related to perception formation is that parents are primarily getting the information about secondary schools in a self-directed and community-oriented manner. They are either researching the schools themselves or relying on their community to provide them with information. As such, this recommendation is two pronged and directed at the admissions, enrollment, and marketing employees.

My first recommendation is related to the self-directed research parents report engaging in. This team of employees should create robust online content that attracts and entices Catholic-identified parents as they engage in self-directed research about the school, by focusing on Academic Rigor, Electives, and Financial Considerations. They should steer away from gate-keeping information; requirements to sign up, provide an email/ mailing address, or visit the school to obtain information as this will reduce the availability of valuable information getting to

parents. Instead, they should work to create attractive and multimodal online content that clearly and directly states their offerings within these areas. Ideas include:

- Video tours and highlights of achievements;
- Offerings and academic or elective related events;
- Student, parent, and alumni testimonials and interviews;
- Interactive brochures with clear call outs to data that supports success in these critical areas;
- Comprehensive online overviews with photographs, videos, and examples of offerings.

Additionally, all important and impressive accomplishments should be highlighted regularly in the local media and through the social media pages related to the school. This approach will provide a varied opportunity for parents engaged in self-directed research to learn about the excellent work Notre Dame is doing that is in line with their priorities.

The second recommendation is related to parents who report that their perceptions are influenced by word of mouth from other parents, friends, or alumni, and through their child or their child's friends. I recommend that the admissions and marketing employees take a "storytelling" approach such that personalized experiences and successes of programs, students, alumni, and employees are described and shared in such a way that they feel personal to the individuals receiving the information. It is difficult to infiltrate the inner social circles the information is circulating in, but with more stories and depictions of lived experiences by individuals affiliated with Notre Dame, a socially driven perspective will begin to circulate with the opportunity to be shared within these circles. Additionally, given the undeniable impact of social media on both students and their parents, I recommend that these employees utilize Tik Tok and Instagram specifically to share information about the school. Tik Tok is a platform in

which stories can be told easily with interviews, visual depictions, and vocalization. Instagram can supplement this approach by both featuring the Tik Tok videos in “reel” format for those who do not utilize Tik Tok and also by providing a platform for photographs and stories to be shared publicly and amongst communities of people who know and interact with one another.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, my initial conversations with Principal Cipriani pointed to many of the ultimate findings of this project. I believe he is a leader with his finger on the pulse of the struggles his school is encountering within the community that inhibit healthy enrollment. My hope is that this project solidified many of his and his team’s suspicions and provided further information, important context, and a focus for these issues. Additionally, the recommendations come with the need for support and resources, particularly in terms of financial and human resources. Some are not immediately operational, and I would support Principal Cipriani sharing these findings and recommendations with leaders above him who would be able to support the expansion of funding and resources necessary to actualize these recommendations while simultaneously implementing ideas able to take place with less support more immediately. Through intentional and strategic decision making focused on satisfying community interests while remaining mission-oriented, Notre Dame has the opportunity to improve enrollment and influence a generation of intelligent, values-oriented individuals.

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APPENDIX A

Survey – (Bott, 2017; Gasper, 2021; Harsh, 2018; Puccio, 2000, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
 - a. 20-30
 - b. 30-40
 - c. 40-50
 - d. 50-60
 - e. 60-70
 - f. Prefer not to answer
2. What gender do you identify as
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. _____ short answer space
 - d. Prefer not to answer
3. Please specify your ethnicity
 - a. Caucasian
 - b. African-American
 - c. Latino or Hispanic
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native American
 - f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - g. Two or More
 - h. Other/Unknown
 - i. Prefer not to say
4. Are you married?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to say
5. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
 - a. Some High School
 - b. High School
 - c. Bachelor's Degree
 - d. Master's Degree
 - e. Ph.D. or higher
 - f. Trade School
 - g. Prefer not to say
6. If married, what is the highest degree or level of education your partner has completed?
 - a. Some High School
 - b. High School
 - c. Bachelor's Degree
 - d. Master's Degree
 - e. Ph.D. or higher
 - f. Trade School

- g. Prefer not to say
- 7. Household income
 - a. Less than \$25,000
 - b. \$25,000 - \$50,000
 - c. \$50,000 - \$100,000
 - d. \$100,000 - \$200,000
 - e. More than \$200,000
 - f. Prefer not to say
- 8. How many children do you have
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
 - f. 6 or more
- 9. If applicable, please specify your religion
 - a. Catholicism/Christianity
 - b. Judaism
 - c. Islam
 - d. Buddhism
 - e. Hinduism
 - f. Other: _____
 - g. Prefer not to say
- 10. How would you describe the level of religion your family practices, if any?
 - a. None
 - b. Low
 - c. Medium
 - d. High
 - e. Extremely High
- 11. How many of your children are between the ages of 12-28?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
 - f. 6 or more
- 12. What type of elementary school do/does/did your child(ren) attend
 - a. Public
 - b. Charter
 - c. Private Non-Religious
 - d. Private Religious- Catholic
 - e. Private Religious – Other
 - f. My child/children has attended different types of schools
- 13. What type of high school do/does/did/will your child(ren) attend
 - a. My child attends Notre Dame High School – Fairfield
 - b. Public

- c. Charter
- d. Private Non-Religious
- e. Private Religious- Catholic (Not Notre Dame High School Fairfield)
- f. Private Religious – Other
- g. My child has attended multiple types of institutions
- h. I'm not sure yet, we are still in the decision making phase

RQ #1

14. Please rank the following school-selection factors in order from most to least important
- a. Academic Rigor/College Placement
 - b. Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language)
 - c. School Safety
 - d. Extra-Curricular Offerings: Academic, Social, Special Interest
 - e. Athletics: Offerings/Success
 - f. Facilities: Beauty/Comfort
 - g. Values/Values Education
 - h. School Tradition/Spirit
 - i. Social Factors: My Child will have friends/community
 - j. Personal Connection to School: Parent is alum, Friends attend/attended, etc.
 - k. Financial/Economic Considerations

RQ#2

15. My perception of Catholic high school education in Fairfield County can be best described as
- a. It is an excellent educational choice, better than other area offerings
 - b. It is a good choice, similar to many other area offerings
 - c. It is a mediocre choice, better offerings can be found elsewhere
 - d. It is a bad choice
16. My perception of Notre Dame Fairfield can be best described as
- a. It is an excellent educational choice, better than other area offerings
 - b. It is a good choice, similar to many other area offerings
 - c. It is a mediocre choice, better offerings can be found elsewhere
 - d. It is a bad choice
17. Based on what I know Notre Dame excels in
- a. Academic Rigor/College Placement
 - b. Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language)
 - c. School Safety
 - d. Extra-Curricular Offerings: Academic, Social, Special Interest
 - e. Athletics: Offerings/Success
 - f. Facilities: Beauty/Comfort
 - g. Values/Values Education
 - h. School Tradition/Spirit
 - i. Social Factors: My Child will have friends/community
 - j. Personal Connection to School: Parent is alum, Friends attend/attended, etc.
 - k. Financial/Economic Considerations
18. Based on what I know Notre Dame struggles in
- a. Academic Rigor/College Placement
 - b. Elective Course/Specialize Course Offerings (STEM, Art, Foreign Language)

- c. School Safety
 - d. Extra-Curricular Offerings: Academic, Social, Special Interest
 - e. Athletics: Offerings/Success
 - f. Facilities: Beauty/Comfort
 - g. Values/Values Education
 - h. School Tradition/Spirit
 - i. Social Factors: My Child will have friends/community
 - j. Personal Connection to School: Parent is alum, Friends attend/attended, etc.
 - k. Financial/Economic Considerations
19. My knowledge and perceptions of the high schools in the Fairfield, CT area are influenced by
- a. Word of mouth from other parents, friends, alumni
 - b. My child/child's friends
 - c. Public ads, billboards, other general marketing materials that I did not seek out
 - d. Personal online research
 - e. In person or virtual pre-scheduled school visits
 - f. Impromptu school drive-by
 - g. Newspaper articles or social media posts
 - h. I did not feel the need to learn about these factors prior to enrollment

RQ #3

20. What is your profession?
- a. Management
 - b. Business/Financial
 - c. Computer/Mathematics
 - d. Architecture/Engineering
 - e. Life, Physical, Social Science
 - f. Community/Social Service
 - g. Legal
 - h. Education
 - i. Art, Design, Entertainment, Sports, Media
 - j. Healthcare
 - k. Protective Service
 - l. Food Preparation
 - m. Personal Care and Service
 - n. Sales
 - o. Office/Administrative
 - p. Farming/Fishing/Forestry
 - q. Construction/Extraction
 - r. Installation, Maintenance, Repair
 - s. Production
 - t. Transportation/Material Moving
 - u. Military
 - v. Homemaker
21. How would you describe your positioning in your workplace?
- a. Senior level
 - b. Upper Management

- c. Middle Management
 - d. General Workforce
 - e. Part-time, temporary, contractor
 - f. I am not involved in a workplace hierarchy
22. If married, what is your partner's profession?
- a. Management
 - b. Business/Financial
 - c. Computer/Mathematics
 - d. Architecture/Engineering
 - e. Life, Physical, Social Science
 - f. Community/Social Service
 - g. Legal
 - h. Education
 - i. Art, Design, Entertainment, Sports, Media
 - j. Healthcare
 - k. Protective Service
 - l. Food Preparation
 - m. Personal Care and Service
 - n. Sales
 - o. Office/Administrative
 - p. Farming/Fishing/Forestry
 - q. Construction/Extraction
 - r. Installation, Maintenance, Repair
 - s. Production
 - t. Transportation/Material Moving
 - u. Military
 - v. Homemaker
23. If married, how would you describe your positioning in your workplace?
- a. Senior level
 - b. Upper Management
 - c. Middle Management
 - d. General Workforce
 - e. Part-time, temporary, contractor
 - f. I am not involved in a workplace hierarchy
24. What are your hobbies (select all that apply)
- a. Sports
 - b. Art
 - c. Games
 - d. Music
 - e. Spiritual
 - f. Travel
 - g. Fitness
25. When considering where your child attended, currently attends, or plans to attend high school, do you have family, friends, or other close associates whose children also attended the school?
- a. Yes b. No

APPENDIX B

Hello!

My name is Mia James Westendorp, and I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. For my Final Capstone Project, I am interested in understanding the attitudes and perceptions related to high school selection of parents with children between the ages of 12-28 who live within 30 driving minutes of Notre Dame High School- Fairfield.

The purpose of this project is to assist Notre Dame High School- Fairfield to better understand the families in the local community along with their desires and motivations related to high school selection with the goal of increasing enrollment.

The survey consists of 28 multiple choice or “select your top 3” questions with no open-ended responses. It will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Participating in this survey is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason, and you can exit the survey at any time prior to completion.

Additionally, the survey does not collect any personally identifiable information.

Thank you for participating in this survey. Should you have any questions, please reach out to me at jamesmc2@vanderbilt.edu. Here is the link:

https://peabody.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6rFq4Ftzv8HGamG?fbclid=IwAR3rK8IkuArKHlz4ZN_tKFMjQrZaUjg6g98bO170D0EVd_tTVXbHewSnpU

Many thanks!

Mia