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Eric Hoover

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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## Alumni of Liberal-Arts Colleges See Value in Their Degrees

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By [Eric Hoover](#)

*Washington*—When you’ve got a target on your back, you can run and hide—or you can commission a study. A group of liberal-arts colleges chose to do the latter, and now their leaders are trumpeting the results.

On Tuesday, the Annapolis Group, which represents 130 private liberal-arts colleges, released the [findings of a national survey](#) of college graduates. Alumni of Annapolis Group colleges, the survey found, reported the highest level of satisfaction with their undergraduate experience. Seventy-seven percent rated it as “excellent,” compared with 59 percent of graduates of private colleges and 56 percent of graduates of top-ranked public universities.

Alumni of Annapolis Group colleges were more likely than graduates of other institutions to say that their alma mater had prepared them for their first job, as well as for life after college. They were also more likely to say that they had found a mentor in college, been challenged by a professor, and experienced a sense of community among students.

Philip A. Glotzbach, president of Skidmore College and chairman of the Annapolis Group’s executive committee, described the survey as an attempt to define value at a time when pundits and parents alike are questioning the usefulness of a college degree, especially one that comes from a liberal-arts college with a hefty price tag. “We feel the need to make the case for our sector,” he said, “because it’s so easy for others to paint us with this broad brush.”

Mr. Glotzbach’s remarks came during a discussion with education reporters here on Tuesday. He was joined by the presidents of Kenyon and Washington & Jefferson Colleges, and of the College of Saint Benedict. Each described the report as an antidote to skepticism about the benefits of the residential model in an age of online learning. Moreover, they hoped the findings would affirm that not all colleges are the same, a point that is often lost in debates about the usefulness of a college degree.

“There’s been a conflation of the notion of ‘college’ that obscures for the public the ability to see differences among different kinds of colleges,” said Tori Haring-Smith, president of Washington & Jefferson.

The survey, conducted by Hardwick Day, a higher-education consulting firm, was based on telephone interviews of 2,700 college graduates who earned degrees from one of four groups of four-year institutions: private residential liberal-arts colleges, represented by the Annapolis Group; private colleges; “top 50” public universities (as rated by *U.S. News & World Report*); and national public flagship universities. Respondents graduated between 1995 and 2006, and were interviewed in 2002 and again in 2011.

On Tuesday, I asked James H. Day, a principal at Hardwick Day and director of the survey, if there were specific characteristics of students who choose to attend liberal-arts colleges that might explain some of the survey's results, such as the fact that 87 percent of Annapolis Group alumni graduated in four years, compared with 51 percent of alumni of flagship public institutions. In other words, might some findings say more about students at liberal-arts colleges—which enroll a small fraction of the nation's students—than about the colleges themselves?

While some students are a better fit for liberal-arts colleges than others, Mr. Day said, “inputs” alone did not explain the survey's results. He described the findings as proof that liberal-arts colleges *do* something to students (“transform them,” said one president) after they enroll.

As critics continue to question the future of residential liberal-arts colleges, it's only fair to consider what graduates of those institutions see when they look back at their own experiences. “Do they think this is all in vain?” Mr. Day said. “Do they think this is just silliness and an erosion of their time? The answer is no.”

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