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Catholic School Enrollment Motivation: Our Wheeling-Charleston Diocese

During recent years many private schools have experienced significant decreases in enrollment. As the traditional K-12 student becomes more difficult to identify, insights concerning enrollment motivation become critical. This information is of considerable importance for making decisions regarding effective recruitment efforts. Over 25 years ago Barton (1978) recommended that school administrators should seriously consider applied marketing approaches for a more complete understanding of enrollment motivation and long range planning. Fishbein and associates (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Jaccard & Davidson, 1972; Pomazal & Jaccard, 1976) have developed and refined a social-psychological marketing theory of behavioral intentions which may be useful when applied to Catholic school enrollment motivation.

If one can make the highly plausible assumption that enrollment is an intentional, goal-oriented behavior, then a logical approach to a more complete understanding of enrollment motivation would be to explore systematically the specific determinants of attitudes and subsequent intentions to enroll. Although enrollment decisions may be influenced by external factors (e.g., social pressure, transportation problems), ultimately the decision is an individual one.

Various versions of the above theory have been highly successful in increasing understanding of many other intentional behaviors such as buying consumer products (Lutz, 1975), donating blood (Pomazal & Jaccard, 1976), and enrolling in college (Pomazal, 1980). Research on the determinants of the theory's attitudinal construct is also supportive. For example, a person's attitude toward a behavior has consistently been shown to be highly related to the summation of one's beliefs about the consequences of performing the behavior weighted by the value each of these consequences has for the individual (cf. Jaccard & Davidson, 1972; Pomazal & Jaccard, 1976). Algebraically, these notions are expressed by the following formula:

$$Ab = \sum_{i=1}^n B_i E_i$$

where Ab = Attitude toward the behavior, B_i = the Belief that performing the behavior will lead to some outcome i , E_i = the person's Evaluation (or value) of outcome i , i = the number of that particular outcome and n = the total number of outcomes.

METHOD

Eliciting Questionnaire

To ensure that the specific beliefs and opinions measured in the final questionnaire were valid and appropriate for the enrollment motivation of interest, over 600 parents from throughout the diocese were asked to complete an open-ended eliciting questionnaire. This questionnaire asked parishioners to list their beliefs about the possible positive and negative consequences of enrolling children in a Catholic school, and to indicate various persons or groups who might influence their decision. Content analysis of the 89 returned questionnaires resulted in the selection of the 19 most frequently mentioned issues concerning Catholic school enrollment which were used in the final, closed-format questionnaire.

Final Questionnaire

Measures of the beliefs and evaluations in the final, four-page, closed-format questionnaire were based on the semantic differential technique (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). These measures, developed and refined through previous research, have demonstrated reliability and convergent, as well as discriminant validity (Jaccard, Weber, & Lundmark, 1975). Detailed descriptions of the 7-point measures employed are explained elsewhere (Pomazal & Jaccard, 1976).

Respondents

One thousand and fifty questionnaires were offered to adults from *every* parish church within the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese. Of these, 260 (25%) were returned. The seventy four respondents for this aspect of the research project were the male and female parishioners who had school-aged children. Special efforts were made to ensure that responses were obtained from persons who would have a wide range of beliefs and values concerning education. Respondents were specifically asked not to include their names.

RESULTS

The 7-point rating scales were assigned values from -3 (very unlikely or very undesirable) to $+3$ (very likely or very desirable). The $\sum B_i E_i$ attitudinal measure for each parent was derived by multiplying (weighting) the score for each belief by the evaluation of that belief, and then summing these products over all of the 19 issues. As predicted, there was a highly significant correlation ($r = .56, p < .01$) between the intention/motivation measure and the derived ($\sum B_i E_i$) attitudinal measure.

Consequently, a closer examination of the determinants of this component ($\sum B_i E_i$) was conducted to obtain detailed insights into the parents' enrollment motivation. Statistical *t*-test

analyses were performed comparing the mean belief strengths and mean evaluations of outcomes for those parents who did *not* intend to enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic school (n=28) with those who *did* intend to do so (n=44). The results are presented in Table 1. As can be seen the results reveal that the non-intending parents differed from the intending parents on seven of the belief strengths and five of the favorableness evaluations of the outcomes.

Explanation of the Tabled Results

Admittedly there are many categories, numbers and symbols in Table 1. Using issue #3 as a first example, note that the non-intending parents did not believe as strongly ($\bar{x} = 1.54$) that a Catholic school education would “Prepare students better for the future” as did the intending parents ($\bar{x} = 2.02$). Concerning their evaluation of this possible outcome, both parental groups equally positively valued it (non-intenders, $\bar{x} = 2.50$ vs. intenders, $\bar{x} = 2.66$).

Issue #19 reveals a different pattern of results. In this case, the two groups of parents (non-intenders vs. intenders) equally believed in the likelihood that Catholic school enrollment would, “Require standardized school clothing/uniforms” ($\bar{x} = 2.32$ vs. $\bar{x} = 2.45$). For this issue, however, they differed on how they favorably evaluated this outcome. As can be seen ($\bar{x} = 1.07$ vs. $\bar{x} = 2.36$).

The results of issue #11 “Teach students self-discipline” are of particular interest. It is unique in that it differentiated the non-intenders from the intenders on *both* their belief in how likely this would occur ($\bar{x} = 1.57$ vs. $\bar{x} = 2.00$) *as well as* how desirable they rated this outcome ($\bar{x} = 2.25$ vs. $\bar{x} = 2.77$).

The results concerning issue #1 “Offer students a better quality education” are crucial and perhaps the crux of the implications of this theory and subsequent recommendations. Note that

this intuitively important issue was equally *believed* and equally *evaluated* by *both* groups. The results reveal (and I might dare to suggest) that this issue might not really be a factor when it comes to attempting to change the enrollment motivation of Catholic parents within the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese at the present time. Time, money and effort might not need be spent addressing and promoting this positive attribute of our schools, since it is *already* equally believed and evaluated by both groups. This reasoning also applies to the beliefs about, and the evaluations of, the seven other *non-differentiating* issues — #4, 7, 8, 12, 14, 17, 18.

General Recommendations

Assuming that enrolling children in our Catholic schools would, in fact, lead to the following outcomes, attempts should be made to convince non-intending parents to more strongly *believe* the following:

“Enrolling their children in a Catholic school would ...”

- Not necessarily be an expensive/costly education.
- Prepare students better for their future life.
- Expose their children to dedicated/concerned teachers.
- Teach their children higher moral/ethical standards and values.
- Teach their children self-discipline.
- Allow more parent-teacher attention/involvement.
- Strengthen family values at home.

Assuming that the following educational outcomes are, in fact, desirable, attempts should be made to convince non-intending parents to more strongly *value* the following:

- Smaller/more personalized classes
- A safer educational environment

- Learning self-discipline
- Fewer extracurricular activities as being not necessarily all that undesirable.
- Standardized school clothing/uniforms

Although beyond the scope of the present paper, several specific suggestions about how to achieve the above recommendations may be appropriate.

Belief (#3) “Prepare students better for their future life.”

Present valid and convincing data that demonstrate that students from Catholic schools: have fewer divorces, are more likely to graduate from college, earn more money, etc.

Value (#19) “Required standardized school clothing/uniforms.”

Demonstrate that school uniforms could lower expensive back-to-school clothing costs, save time in the morning deciding what to wear, reduce student rivalry, increase self-discipline at school, etc.

Subsequent Findings

The present type of analysis comparing the belief strengths and the evaluations of outcomes between non-intenders and intenders could also be conducted on numerous other categories of interest. Valuable insights could be gained regarding the specific cognitive-emotional issues which differentiate various groups. For example, crucial differences between male and female parents could be ascertained. The data obtained in this study allows for such comparisons. The mean scores on the belief strengths and evaluations of outcomes for the male (n = 25) and female (n = 49) parents with school age children are presented in Table 2. What is revealing is that the male and female parents had the *same* belief strengths about *all* of the outcomes *except* issue #19 -- “A Catholic school education would require standardized school clothing/uniforms.” For

whatever reason, the female parents more strongly believed this ($\bar{x} = 2.63$) than did the males ($\bar{x} = 2.08$) $p < .01$. The two genders differed on five of their evaluations of the desirability of the outcomes, issues #4, 5, 6, 12, 13. However, only one of these (#5) was an identified motivational value which differentiated the intenders from the non-intenders — “Provide students smaller/more personalized classes.” Parents rated this outcome as more desirable ($\bar{x} = 2.63$) than did the males ($\bar{x} = 2.12$) $p < .01$. This additional information could be used when promoting smaller/more personalized classes to female parents.

Comparisons also could be made between older and younger parents, devout and non-devout parents or parents who themselves had attended a Catholic school and those who had not. In this manner, the unique motivational factors of select groups could be systematically identified and properly addressed. With appropriate sampling of specific target populations, as was done in the present study, this theoretically based and empirically determined information could serve to provide more focused guidelines for promotional efforts. This information also could be used to alert board members, principals, and teachers to the crucial motivational issues involved in the decision-making process of various types of parents.

DISCUSSION

The present results strongly support the notion that Catholic school enrollment motivation can be predicted and systematically explained from the proposed social-psychological theory of attitudes and intentions. As predicted, anonymous intentions to enroll children at Wheeling-Charleston Catholic schools were significantly correlated with the theory’s derived attitudinal component.

As previously mentioned many private schools have experienced a noteworthy decrease in enrollments. The proposed reconceptualization of enrollment motivation and the supporting

results offer several explanations why this may have been the case. Promotional efforts or enrollment campaigns may have been less than optimal at changing enrollment motivation for one or more of the following reasons.

First, past approaches may have focused on nonsalient issues — beliefs or values which are not even *considered* by intenders or nonintenders. The eliciting questionnaire procedure greatly reduced this possibility by identifying and focusing on only the modal salient issues of those concerned. For example, emphasizing a school's recent technological upgrade of their computers would probably not be effective at changing attitudes or intentions if a parent's main concern is the teaching of higher moral/ethical standards and values.

Secondly, although a group's salient beliefs and values may have been addressed, they might have been issues which failed to differentiate the two groups. Unless enrollment efforts effectively address the specific differentiating salient beliefs and values related to the outcomes of enrollment in a Catholic school, one should not expect to change attitudes or motivation, let alone enrollment behavior. The present data suggest (at least for the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese) that to change attitudes/intentions about enrollment — time, money, thought and energy would most wisely be spent concentrating on the twelve identified issues (beliefs and values) which differentiated the intenders from the nonintenders.

Enrollment change strategies used in the past may have been relatively ineffective for a *third* reason — they may not have focused on a sufficient *number* of differentiating salient issues. As the theory predicted and the data demonstrated, a parent's attitude toward a particular behavior (Ab) is determined by the *summation* of his or her beliefs and evaluations regarding the consequences of that behavior ($\sum B_i E_i$). Significant change in only a few differentiating beliefs

or values regarding enrolling may be insufficient in changing a parent's *overall* attitude/motivation.

Finally, when discussing the relationship between beliefs, values, attitudes and enrollment motivation, the focus has been on the outcomes concerning *enrollment* and not on general issues regarding the school itself. For example, facts or beliefs *about* a particular Catholic school (e.g., It has a new library) may very well be quite different from the personal beliefs and values a parent has about the specific consequences of *enrollment* at that school (e.g., It would teach students self-discipline.). To predict, explain, or change enrollment motivation, effort would most wisely be spent on the specific beliefs and values parents have regarding *enrolling* their child(ren) in a Catholic school.

The enrollment motivation issues identified in the present study could be used to plan the specific wording of promotional copy in advertisements. For other more personal approaches, the present reconceptualization may provide a valuable structural tool for identifying the possible determinants of a parent's motivation. Although it may be inappropriate to formally interview or quiz a parent, it may very well be worthwhile to explore with parents in a respectful manner the unique determinants of their motivation.

Admittedly, any given approach focusing on identifying and changing the differentiating salient beliefs or values will not be easy or necessarily effective. As is often the case for many parents, few if any curriculum programs may be seen as "attractive." Furthermore, it may very well be impossible to convince some parents that a particular Catholic school is more beneficial than a local public school. However, unless the specific factors which make up their decision are identified and directly addressed, future attempts to change enrollment motivation may continue to remain a "hit or miss" at best and not fully understood, even when effective.

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Table 1

BELIEF STRENGTHS AND EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES FOR PARENTS WHO INTENDED AND DID NOT INTEND TO ENROLL THEIR CHILD IN A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Perceived Outcomes: A Catholic School Education Would:	Mean Belief Scores (Unlikely-Likely) ^a		Mean Evaluation Scores (Undesirable-Desirable) ^b	
	Did not intend ^c	Intended ^d	Did not intend	Intended
1. Offer students a better quality education	1.54	1.95	2.71	2.64
2. Be an expensive/costly education	2.07	1.30*	-1.61	-1.14
3. Prepare students better for their future life	1.54	2.02*	2.50	2.66
4. Shelter students from “sex, drugs, violence”	.68	1.09	1.89	2.32
5. Provide students smaller/more personalized classes	1.89	2.16	2.21	2.66*
6. Expose students to dedicated/concerned teachers	1.39	2.14**	2.39	2.59
7. Provide students a Catholic religious background	2.25	2.39	2.11	2.09
8. Make students better qualified for admission to a good college	1.57	1.95	2.64	2.68
9. Provide a safer educational environment	1.86	2.23	2.29	2.77*
10. Teach students higher moral/ethical standards and values	2.04	2.48*	2.46	2.80
11. Teach students self-discipline	1.57	2.00•	2.25	2.77**
12. Reduce student exposure to secular, materialistic, values	.54	.93	1.43	1.95
13. Allow more parent-teacher attention/involvement	1.29	2.05**	2.21	2.57
14. Offer students fewer classes in physics, math, science	-.46	-.55	-1.86	-2.22
15. Strengthen family values in homes	1.00	1.61•	2.25	2.50
16. Offer fewer extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, performing arts)	.36	.57	-1.11	-1.91*
17. Provide more individualized student-teacher attention/involvement	1.64	1.86	2.25	2.52
18. Present transportation problems	.61	-.18	-1.43	-1.93
19. Require standardized school clothing/uniforms	2.32	2.45	1.07	2.36***

^aBelief scores ranged from -3 to 3.

^bEvaluation scores ranged from -3 to 3.

^c n = 28

^d n = 44

• p < .10

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001

Table 2

MEAN SCORES ON BELIEFS AND EVALUATIONS OF OUTCOMES FOR FEMALE AND MALE PARENTS

Perceived Outcomes: A Catholic School Education Would:	Mean Belief Scores (Unlikely-Likely) ^a		Mean Evaluation Scores (Undesirable-Desirable) ^b	
	Males ^c	Females ^d	Males	Females
1. Offer students a better quality education	1.76	1.82	2.64	2.67
2. Be an expensive/costly education	1.52	1.63	-1.28	-1.27
3. Prepare students better for their future life	1.84	1.80	2.44	2.65
4. Shelter students from “sex, drugs, violence”	.92	.80	1.60	2.41**
5. Provide students smaller/more personalized classes	1.96	2.04	2.12	2.63**
6. Expose students to dedicated/concerned teachers	1.72	1.84	2.04	2.73***
7. Provide students a Catholic religious background	2.12	2.47	1.80	2.22
8. Make students better qualified for admission to a good college	1.88	1.82	2.64	2.69
9. Provide a safer educational environment	1.92	2.20	2.32	2.73
10. Teach students higher moral/ethical standards and values	2.32	2.29	2.60	2.71
11. Teach students self-discipline	1.76	1.76	2.48	2.61
12. Reduce student exposure to secular, materialistic, values	.36	.86	.96	2.14***
13. Allow more parent-teacher attention/involvement	1.52	1.69	2.00	2.67***
14. Offer students fewer classes in physics, math, science	-.32	-.59	-1.92	-2.27
15. Strengthen family values in homes	1.08	1.45	2.12	2.53
16. Offer fewer extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, performing arts)	.08	.71	-1.44	-1.67
17. Provide more individualized student-teacher attention/involvement	1.64	1.71	2.08	2.51
18. Present transportation problems	-.20	.55	-1.40	-1.98
19. Require standardized school clothing/uniforms	2.08	2.63**	1.80	1.90

^aBelief scores ranged from -3 to 3.

^bEvaluation scores ranged from -3 to 3.

^c n = 25

^d n = 49

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001