
ANNOTATION

Gibson, Ann. "The Impact of One Catholic Women's College: Voices of Alumnae." EdD dissertation, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, 2005. 151 pp.

This dissertation investigated the "experience of education at a Catholic women's college during the twentieth century and the impact of that educational experience upon subsequent lives of alumnae from the point of view of alumnae" (iii). The author began with an "historical overview of women's colleges (3) including background about the establishment of women's colleges (4), attitudes toward higher education for women (6), establishment and early goals of women's colleges (7), and special circumstances of Catholic women's colleges" (7). Particular mention of the first Catholic girl's academy, Ursuline Academy, established in 1727 in New Orleans, was made. This institution was one of a total of 600 academies and seminaries for women that were established in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of which 300 were Catholic women's colleges (8). Many of the seminaries and academies progressed to colleges such as The Academy of Norte Dame in Baltimore obtained a charter as a college in 1896 and Trinity College (Washington DC) was the first institution to be established specifically as a Catholic women's college (1896).

The author notes that there is a small but significant body of research about women's colleges in general, however, a lack of information has been gathered on Catholic women's colleges (the justification of this study) and previous research primarily focused on marriage and career patterns of graduates or on the institutions themselves. The author also stated that over the last fifty years many of these women's colleges have closed and alumnae are growing older, thus there is a fear that information related to the impact of these colleges could be lost (10). The author asked the question, "What has been the impact of women's colleges on the women who attended them?" and collected the information from various graduates, thirty-five plus years after graduation (11).

The author used the methodology of historical case study, focused on one Midwestern Catholic women's college, with one cohort of graduates. Graduates were asked their understanding of the perceptions of significant impact from their education (18). A total of six questions were asked: (1) "what have been the career paths and achievements of alumnae from this Midwestern Catholic women's college?; (2) what do alumnae of this Midwestern Catholic women's college value as success in their lives?; (3) from the point of view of these alumnae, in what ways, if any, did their college education contribute to their success?; (4) what life activities and accomplishments did the participants value as indicators of success?; (5) did the cited accomplishments of alumnae match the goals of the college's mission statement?; and (6) were the cited accomplishments and successes of the alumna similar to or different from those that have been reported in the research literature on impact?" (19).

The study was significant because it focused specifically on one college for women. It was noted, overall there is a gap of research on women's colleges and the significance of the impact of them on their graduates. The author hoped other researchers would continue the research that has been started to narrow this gap of available resources related to this topic (20). A comprehensive literature review was created focusing on women's colleges, their impact and the mission of the colleges (49).

The case study focused specifically on the class of 1969 from a small Midwestern Catholic women's college (54). A purposeful sample was taken of all living alumna and names were collected from the college archive (55). A total of 231 women were living, at the start of the study, for which accurate and active addresses existed in the college's archives. From that population, six individuals were randomly selected to be interviewed, to a point of sufficiency. The author asked open-ended but structured questions and had a dialogue with the participants that focused on their work and family life (58).

Along with the interviews, the author completed archival research of documents (56). The archival documents reviewed were from 1969: college bulletins, catalogs, and handbooks; entrance characteristics and demographics; graduation data including majors and graduate school admissions; reports of first jobs; marriage records; and newsletter entries. From these documents, "a descriptive summary of the educational experience of the class of 1969 was retained for the case" (57). "The research provided a snapshot of participants at a point of time in which the author has made a case for their usefulness in themes of life perspective and of the impact of their college experience" (63).

A review of the mission statement from the college and the demographics of the class of 1969 were reported (75). Majors, religion, and college demographics were discussed (82). College traditions, college regulations, and first positions after graduation were noted (84). All of this information was recovered during the author's archival research and was used to understand the educational experience of the cohort and the impact of attending a women's only college upon graduates' lives since graduation.

Interviews were compiled; and participants provided personal stories from their student days that added thick, rich descriptions of student perspectives of the education offered at the college from 1965 to 1969 (85). Participants reported the most prominent activities since graduation have been family life, work outside the home, and volunteer service (88). Three common themes emerged from the participants when asked to define success. Participants valued: (1) their contributions to family life, (2) their competence at chosen professions, and (3) their ability to make a difference in the lives of others (97). In addition, the college was "credited with providing excellent academic preparation, strong role models, and support in the form of personal attention, high expectations, and community spirit" (98).

Various quotes from the interviews were used to show the importance of these points. "Participants reported the goal of the college's mission statement in both their words and their lifetime behaviors" (101). Individuals stated characteristics such as family influences and previous educational endeavors as major impacts to their educational journey (101); and the educational experience that held students to clear and high standards prepared them to excel not

only in their chosen professions but also as strong Catholic women (104). Throughout the interviews, various faculty members were mentioned as role models and significant individuals within the participants' educational experience; and the sense of a strong community spirit while attending college was noted (105).

The study found that the alumnae participants interviewed were "leading lives of service to others in their families, their professions, and in the communities" (112). Personal qualities, goal achievement, and positive impact on the lives of others were found to be markers of the alumnae's own success (112). Limitations to the study were addressed (125), as well as contributions to the field (127) and recommendations for future research (127). Overall, the study found that participants "made their contributions through using their education to influence society and the college can measure its success by the fulfillment of the goals of its mission in the lives of the participants within this study" (129). "According to the participants, their educational experience mirrored the mission of the college and alumnae reported living lives in accord with the goals of the college" (129).