

Public or Private: Which is Better for Student Learning and Development?

Allyson N. Randolph

Western Illinois University

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April is the month when most high school seniors are attempting to finalize their college plans. However, many high school juniors are just beginning their college search and are weighing the pros and cons of going out-of-state or staying in-state, going to community college or four-year institution, or finally, whether to attend a public or private institution. This paper analyze all aspects involved with determining which type of institution, public or private, is better for student development and learning. Various sources of literature will be utilized to discuss the various types of arguments surrounding this issue including accessibility, diversity, quality of faculty and staff, and ultimately the level of student development and learning provided.

Most writers and researchers encourage individuals to consider the unique characteristics of individual institutions rather than try to generalize public and private institutions as a whole. Toor (2001), in an article titled “Picking the Right College is a Vital, Unimportant Process”, blatantly questions “So how much does it matter where you go to college? I suspect the answer is both ‘a lot’ and ‘not at all’” (p.4). However, through analysis of multiple sources of literature, this paper will strive to develop a concrete answer to the question “Which is better for student development and learning: public or private?”.

### **Literature Review**

The following literature analyses will discuss some of the most important aspects involved in deciding whether public institutions or private institutions are better for student learning and development. The most common issues analyzed in literature include access to institutions of higher education, diversity of students, faculty, and staff, quality of faculty and staff, and the level of student learning and development available.

**Access**

One of the most common topics of debate to distinguish between public and private institutions is the issue of accessibility to higher education. Generally, public institutions pride themselves in providing higher education to all students, including low-income, dependent students. However, some studies contradict this thought. Either way, access is directly linked to the diversity of student enrollments and evidence has suggested that involvement in diversity activities has a positive influence on critical thinking skills and cognitive growth during college (Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001).

**Access to Public Institutions.** Curris (2006), in an article titled “The Public Purposes of Public Colleges” defends the mission of many public institutions. He says “for public universities, unlike for private institutions, providing access is not a discretionary matter” (p.1). However, he continues to explain that achieving accessibility for students is not always easy, especially when universities cannot accommodate all qualified applicants due to caps on enrollments.

Another article written by Carnesale (2006) discusses the widening gap between public and private institutions on the basis of state financial support. Carnesale (2006) says “public institutions have tried to remain true to the basic values on which they were founded: excellence and access for qualified students, regardless of ability to pay” (p.2). Even state funding continues to grow weaker, public institutions are still trying to provide quality education for all qualified students. However, quality education may not be possible as institutions have to continually cut funds in areas that greatly support student learning and success.

The topic of access and affordability is discussed further by Breneman (2003). He states that the primary commitments of public institutions is to “keep tuition low for state residents

regardless of their ability to pay, maintain access for low-income students, and offer a high-quality public education to all students” (p.2). However, again, because of the economic struggles of many states right now, many institutions are forced to raise tuition costs. When tuition increases, gaps in enrollment by race and income seem to widen because states cannot adjust the amount of financial aid available to students to match the increase in tuition.

However, since access still remains a priority to most public institutions, accommodations for low-income students and minority students is a greater possibility at public institutions.

Lastly, Perna (2004) conducted an empirical study to determine the numbers of students attending public and private institutions in the United States. She advocates for public institutions to keep their tuition costs low in order to cater to a diverse array of students. She states that the larger the gap in tuition costs between public and private institutions, the increased likelihood of students enrolling at a public institution. In turn, this would increase the size and diversity of the states’ public education sector. By increasing diversity on public campuses, students will have the opportunity to interact with students different from themselves, learn to manage conflict, and take part in meaningful discussions, thus further developing them as an individual.

**Access to Private Institutions.** Although accessibility has long been a strength of public institutions, private institutions are beginning to catch on to this trend. As it becomes more difficult for public institutions to provide accessibility to students, private institutions become more popular and a greater variety of students appear. For instance, in New York, “one in three New York residents enrolled full time at a private college comes from a family that earns less than \$40,000 a year” (Hebel, 2004, p.1). While this number does not represent a majority of low-income students attending private schools, it is still a greater increase in the number of lower

SES students at private schools. Perna (2004) found similar results in her study of the distribution of low-income, dependent students attending private institutions. For example, her report shows that public higher education is only “affordable” for students in five out of fifty states. This leaves forty-five states where public higher education is not accessible. While this does not mean that private institutions are affordable, it shows that low-income students are becoming less likely to attend higher education, thus decreasing the range of diversity on college campuses.

In a study by Pascarella, Cruce, Umbach, Wolniak, Kuh, Carini, Hayek, Gonyea, and Zhao (2006), authors argue that limiting access to higher education at private universities greatly benefits students. They state that “the more academically adroit one’s peers are, the greater the likelihood of one’s being intellectually stimulated and challenged in his or her classroom and nonclassroom interactions with them” (p.252). Since intelligence is positively correlated with income, students who can afford these private institutions are generally more intelligent and can increase the intelligence of their peers. Similarly, Pascarella et al (2006) found that a strong student body can allow faculty to increase academic expectations and classroom demands, which would consequently further enhance students’ academic ability.

In conclusion, student learning and development are greatly impacted by access. While most public institutions have traditionally boasted about their ability to provide access, the current economic climate has made accessibility become increasingly difficult for public institutions. Most argue that greater access provides greater diversity, consequently allowing for greater student development as they expand their social interactions. However, Pascarella et al (2006) provide great evidence that limiting access to private institutions allows greater academic growth and challenge for the students attending.

**Faculty and Staff**

Pascarella et al. (2006) compiled evidence that shows that effective teaching positively affects students' knowledge acquisition and general cognitive competencies such as critical thinking. This said, the quality of faculty and staff at institutions can greatly benefit or hinder the learning of students. In collecting various sources of literature in this area, little to no research was found to verify the strengths of professors at public institutions. Rather, extensive research supported the high quality of professors at private institutions. This is very telling of the quality of teaching at public and private institutions.

It is important to first note the cause of the dramatic differences in the quality of faculty at public and private institution. Schneider (1999) noted that the gap between faculty salaries at public and private universities was greater than ever. Due to decreasing state funds at public universities, these institutions are not able to offer high salaries for faculty. However, since many private universities maintain great sources of revenue including high tuition rates. Thirty years ago, public research institutions offered faculty members three thousand dollars less per year than their counterparts at private universities. In 1999, Schneider noted that the gap between salaries at public and private universities grew to over fifteen thousand dollars. These numbers provide obvious evidence that the quality of professors at public and private colleges will greatly differ and students will likely receive better educations at private institutions.

In a study by Pascarella (2004) analyzing the good practices of liberal arts institutions, Pascarella found that small, selective, private liberal arts colleges foster many good practices and “these good practices included measures of the quality and impact of student interactions with faculty, emphasis on cooperative learning, measures of student academic effort and time on task, prompt feedback to students, indices of high academic expectations, and measures of the quality

of teaching received” (p.69). Pascarella (2004) also noted that during the first and second year of higher education, students at private institutions reported higher levels of faculty interest in teaching and student development, and a greater quality of nonclassroom interactions with faculty than students at large public institutions.

Similarly, a study by Seifert, Drummond, and Pascarella (2006) of African-American students’ experiences at various institutions supported the great quality of faculty at private Historically Black Colleges (HBCs) and private liberal arts colleges. African-American students at HBCs “experienced greater student-faculty contact, received more feedback on their class performance, and reported a learning environment with a more scholarly and intellectual emphasis than their peers at research universities” (Seifert et al, 2006, p.195). These aspects of HBCs were also found to be very similar to private liberal arts colleges.

These analyses of literature provide great support for the high quality of professors at private institutions. Little research supports the high quality of professors at public institutions, which provides great concern for the level of student learning at these institutions.

### **Student Learning and Development**

While the quality of faculty at various institutions is very skewed in favor of private institutions, there is extensive research supporting student development and learning at both public and private institutions. Student learning and development are two of the most critical aspects of a student’s education. Therefore, the research in this section will be analyzed extensively in order for readers to be equipped with the knowledge needed to decide which is better for students—public or private.

**Student Learning and Development at Public Institutions.** Student learning and development at public institutions is greatly influenced by state support and a dedication to

access to all qualified students. For public institutions, since they are given state financial support, they are also required to follow constitutional laws, including free speech laws.

Ashburn (2009) noted that since these institutions are public, this makes them subject to open records laws that require them to share information with the public. This allows for deep, controversial discussions to occur, and students are not sheltered from the realities of life.

Administrators must be open to discussions and provide developmental opportunities for students through these discussions.

Similarly, Christ (2004) discussed the benefits provided at public institutions through the shared public spaces. She noted that private institutions can learn a lot from public institutions in this arena. In public spaces, issues are debated vigorously. Christ (2004) believes that “public space is vital to building a healthy and rich sense of diversity—diversity not only in racial and economic terms, but also of public opinion, religious belief, sexual orientation, and cultural background” (p. 2). Classrooms, lecture halls, and other public spaces allow for robust debate and serious discussions that provoke critical thinking and development amongst students.

Institutional selectivity has shown decreases in the range of diversity in institutions. Since public institutions are committed to providing access to qualified individuals, diverse individuals are more likely to appear on these campuses. Evidence has shown that involvement in diversity activities positively influences critical thinking skills and cognition (Pascarella et al, 2001). With this said, since public institutions are more likely to provide interaction between different students, critical thinking is more likely through these interactions.

These studies provide great evidence in support of the learning and development provided by public institutions. Public spaces, rigorous debate, and frequent interactions with



different populations are very prevalent at public institutions and influence student development and learning very positively.

**Student Learning and Development at Private Institutions.** While there is great research in support of the extensive development and learning that takes place at public institutions, there is a similar amount of information in support of development and learning at private institutions. The difference in this research is in the avenues through which students achieve development and learning. Private institutions foster student learning and development through small, intimate settings, effective teaching, and other developmental programs and services. Inman (1998) states the benefits of attending a private college; “students can benefit from small classes; from a high degree of personal attention and care; from classes that are taught by full-time faculty members, not part-time teachers or graduate assistants; and from the special sense of community that characterizes the small college experience” (p.2). Similarly, Biemiller (2005) recognized that private colleges and universities offer forty percent more space per student than public colleges and universities. This space can be utilized to provide services and programs that give individualized attention to students. Lastly, Carnesale (2006) noted that money plays a great role in the learning and development of students. Private institutions have “about fifty percent more dollars per student” (p.2). The excess amount of money allows for more programs, services, tools, and personnel to cater to the educational and developmental needs of students.

Most institutions measure student satisfaction, development, and learning through retention rates and graduation rates. The Ohio Board of Regents (2008) conducted an assessment of graduation rates of public colleges in comparison to the graduation rates of students at private colleges. The results were glaringly different. The percentage of students

completing a degree program at public two-year colleges was forty-two percent compared to a fifty-eight percent completion at private two-year colleges. This research does not provide discussion of these results, but by comparing numbers alone, we can recognize the ability of private institutions in Ohio to foster student degree completion.

Other studies have measured the levels of student development and learning through Pascarella and Terenzini's (1998) good practices. A study by Pascarella (2004) found that private liberal arts colleges foster many of these good practices, aiding in student development and learning. Simply because of their small size, private liberal arts colleges present students with "a more manageable social-psychological environment that invites greater levels of student engagement that do larger institutions" (p. 70). Similarly, most private institutions adopt an institutional ethos of effective teaching and high expectations. This culture cultivates student development through many avenues of student engagement.

Finally, private HBCs have been studied to promote the strengths of these institutions in fostering student learning and development. Siefert et al (2006) found that students attending private HBCs gain more in personal and cognitive development than African-American students attending predominantly white institutions.

There is extensive research highlighting the benefits of both public and private institutions in providing ample opportunities for student learning and development, however in very different ways. It is important for potential students considering both types of institutions to consider the expectations they have for their education and make decisions based on the attention they will receive from either type of institution.

### **Discussion**

The literature analyzed provides great evidence for the strengths and weaknesses possessed by both public and private institutions. However, the research comparing public and private institutions is not extensive, nor does it cover all areas that are important to consider when deciding which type of institution is better for student learning and development. The following sections will provide implications to keep in mind when analyzing this study as well as recommendations for future research in order to make a knowledge-based decision regarding this topic.

### **Implications**

This paper analyzes public and private institutions through topics of access, diversity, quality of faculty and staff, and the level of student development and learning at institutions. There are several things to keep in mind when analyzing this evidence. First, historically, public institutions have provided great access to qualified students. However, as states struggle economically, access becomes more difficult to attain. In many studies, researchers choose to put public schools ahead of private because they provide access. However, this may become increasingly unlikely as the economy continues to put strains on public institutions.

Second, great access to students often leads to a greater diversity of students, which fosters student development through conversation and experiences. There are several problems with analyzing diversity as a predictor of student success. First, we must find a common definition for “diversity”. For some institutions, diversity is through religion, for others, it is a distinction between rural and suburban students, and for some, diversity is defined based on race, among other things. Different institutions define “diversity” in many ways, and each way provides opportunities for student learning and development in different ways and to various

extents. Also, diversity's effect on student development and learning may become difficult as campuses become more and more diverse. Eventually, today's minority students may become the majority and campuses will become a mixing pot of identities. I would predict that this will foster greater student development, but we will have to develop different means of assessing the effects of diverse student bodies.

Another implication deals with the availability of studies of effective teaching and the quality of faculty and staff. Most studies concentrate on the quality of these professors on a general level, and very few studies distinguish between the differences at public and private institutions. Also, there is extensive research on the quality of faculty at private institutions, but I found no research on the quality of professors at public universities. While this does not mean that public professors are less effective, it just means that the research does not exist. Therefore, I cannot adequately decide which type of institution is better at providing quality teaching.

It is also important to consider the very different ways in which public and private institutions promote student development. Most often, private institutions promote student development through their small sizes and individualized attention to students. On the other hand, public institutions foster student development and learning through the diverse array of students on campus and through state laws such as free speech. These ways are very different from one another cannot be compared without further research and assessment.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we should consider the level of generalizability of these studies. Studies have proven that differences between colleges are less than differences within colleges. Each institution is so unique that it is difficult to attribute one overarching theme to the successes of public and private colleges overall.

**Recommendations**

I would recommend that much more research be done on this topic to make an adequate educated decision in the future. I tried to utilize NSSE results to find quantitative data distinguishing between public and private institutions, but that information was not available. I would recommend not only that studies be conducted to compare public and private institutions overall, but that studies be done to compare the similar qualities of public and private institutions. Due to the nature of being “public” and “private”, there are many natural differences between the two types of institutions that cannot provide adequate evidence to compare the groups.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion to my analyses of multiple sources of literature, I am weary about making a concrete decision about whether public or private institutions are better for student learning and development. There is simply not enough research to make an adequate decisions. After attending a private institution and working at a public institution, my preference is for private institutions, but my experiences and analysis through this paper have helped me recognize the strengths and weaknesses of both types of institutions. I am anxious to see future research conducted on this topic and see how time will change these institutions.

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