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## Seminarian Sentiments about Catholic Schools

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*Three hundred sixty-one seminarians from the 48 diocesan seminaries in the United States and the North American College in Rome, Italy responded to a survey regarding their sentiments about the value of Catholic schools, their effectiveness, and the importance of financially supporting them. The results suggest that while diocesan seminarians are generally supportive of Catholic schools, they are more positive about the value of Catholic schools and the importance of providing financial support than they are about the effectiveness of Catholic schools, especially their religious effectiveness. The seminarians' sentiments toward value and financial support are comparable to those of previous studies of priests. The seminarians' own backgrounds in Catholic schools, selection of the most important purpose of Catholic schools, age, Hispanic ethnicity, and whether the seminary provided academic instruction about Catholic schools are factors that influenced their sentiments, particularly of effectiveness. The study did not include seminarians from religious congregations.*

### Keywords

Seminarians, pastors, school effectiveness, finance

The support of pastors and other priests is essential for the vitality of Catholic schools. The pastor of a parish with a Catholic school has responsibility for the school, both from canonical and practical standpoints. His leadership, moral support, and the financial support his parish provides are critical to the school's success. Even if the parish does not have a Catholic school, the pastor's support for the Catholic schools nearby is important. Among other ways, pastors show their support by encouraging their parishioners to attend Catholic schools and by providing, according to the means of the parish, support to those parishioners needing financial assistance to send their children to Catholic schools.

Since many seminarians after ordination will likely become pastors, their support is likewise vital to Catholic schools. Even in the early years of their ministry as parochial vicars, these priests may have opportunities to visit Catholic schools and teach in them on occasion. Seminarians who have positive sentiments toward Catholic schools will likely continue to have positive sentiments toward the schools after ordination. With the leadership of priests and their support being so critical to Catholic school success, it is important to know what the future priests believe about Catholic schools because their attitudes and involvement will be critical to the future vitality of the schools. This study explores the attitudes of diocesan seminarians about the importance of Catholic schools, their effectiveness, and the need to support them financially.

### Review of Literature

Donovan and Madaus (1969) conducted one of the earliest studies of the perceptions of priests about Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Boston. They found positive and supportive sentiments about Catholic schools among the clergy. In addition, dissertations whose topics concerned the sentiments of priests toward Catholic schools conducted in the Archdiocese of Boston (Sullivan, 1982), the Archdiocese of San Francisco (Schipper, 1982), and the Dioceses of Winona and New Ulm in Minnesota (Tacheny, 1988) came to similar conclusions.

J. Stephen O'Brien conducted the first major national study of the sentiments of priests about Catholic schools for his dissertation completed in 1986 at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. In the book that followed, *Mixed Messages*, O'Brien (1987) described surveying bishops and priests nationwide concerning their perceptions of the value, effectiveness, funding practices, and future structure of Catholic schools. O'Brien wanted to determine whether Andrew Greeley's contention (Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976) that some pastors and future pastors were not supportive of Catholic schools, mainly due to the financial burden on parishes, was still the case a decade later. To accomplish his objectives, O'Brien adapted a questionnaire used by Sullivan (1982) and sent it to a sample of 660 priests selected systematically from a mailing list generated randomly by the publishers of *The Official Catholic Directory*. Slightly more than half of the priests (346) completed and returned the survey.

The priests in O'Brien's study strongly affirmed the value of Catholic schools. A large majority of them (72%) agreed that the need for Catholic

schools was at least as great at the time as in the past. The priests' assessment of the value of Catholic schools varied somewhat according to the number of years they had been ordained and whether or not they themselves had attended Catholic elementary or secondary schools. Priests ordained from 11 to 20 years and those who did not attend Catholic schools were less in agreement with many of the statements in O'Brien's study than were the other priests who participated.

The priests rated the quality of Catholic schools high; however, their ratings varied by the location of their ministry, with the weakest agreement (76%) from the priests in inner-city parishes and the highest agreement (96%) from the priests in suburban parishes. Regarding funding practices, most priests (67%) thought that supporting Catholic schools was an effective use of the church's financial resources, though the majority of the priests felt that Catholic schools used a disproportionate amount of parish revenues relative to the number of parishioners served by the school.

A decade later, Convey (1999, 2000) conducted another national study of priests' sentiments about Catholic schools. In May 1996, using a database provided by the publishers of *The Official Catholic Directory* (OCD), Convey used a stratified random sample to survey 3,012 priests. The sample represented approximately 10% of the priests within each of the 13 Episcopal Regions defined at that time by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, stratified by whether or not the respondents were pastors and whether or not the respondents served in a parish with a Catholic school. About two thirds of the items were the same or similar to items used in previous studies (O'Brien, 1987; Schipper, 1982; Sullivan, 1982; Tacheny, 1988). Slightly over a thousand (1,026) priests from 169 dioceses returned the survey. Based on a factor analysis of the responses to the survey, Convey developed constructs measuring worth, quality, and access, the latter basically representing financial support.

Convey found that approximately three in four priests agreed that Catholic schools were needed, provided quality education, and deserved financial support. The priests' assessments of worth, quality, and financial support differed somewhat depending on their type of ministry. These differences were most evident for pastors rather than parochial vicars and priests in other ministries, where a key variable was whether their parishes had schools. Location of ministry was an important predictor of priests' assessment of financial support, but not of their assessment of the quality of Catholic schools. The more distant the ministry of a priest was from the inner-city, the less inclined he was to support Catholic schools financially. Ministry location

was also an important predictor of pastor assessment of the value and worth of Catholic schools. Pastors of inner-city parishes that did not have schools were the most negative about the value of Catholic schools. The most positive assessments of value came from the pastors of parishes with schools and the pastors of inner-city parishes that cooperated in the sponsorship of schools. In contrast to other studies, previous Catholic school experience had little or no effect on the priests' sentiments concerning Catholic schools.

Ten years later in 2006, Nuzzi, Frabutt, and Holter (2008), using items adapted from O'Brien (1987) and Convey (1999), conducted a survey of pastors of parishes with schools. The results, based on returns from 1,047 pastors, showed strong agreement on the worth and financial support of the schools and slightly lower agreement on their effectiveness. Pastors who attended Catholic schools for three or more years reported higher agreement regarding Catholic school value and quality than did pastors who did not attend Catholic schools. No differences were noted in the pastors' assessment of financial support.

Gautier (2005, 2011) in studies by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found that Catholic schools are effective institutions of religious formation, an important factor for the future clergy to realize as they consider how Catholic schools support the Catholic Church. Gautier found Catholic school graduates to be more knowledgeable and more committed to practicing the Catholic faith than those who did not attend Catholic schools. The results of Gautier's studies supported previous studies about clergy sentiment regarding the academic and religious effectiveness of Catholic schools (Donovan & Madaus, 1969; O'Brien, 1987; Tacheny, 1988; Convey, 1999).

Study after study has found that priests are keenly aware of the financial challenges facing Catholic schools and are concerned about the schools' sustainability. In addition to Catholic school attendance, the sentiments of clergy about the financial challenges facing Catholic schools often vary based on the location of the diocese, the location within a diocese (i.e., suburban or urban), and whether the priest serves in a parish with a Catholic school (Convey & DeFiore, 2003, 2012).

Few studies of the sentiments of seminarians toward Catholic schools are available. A recent study by Simonds, Brock, Cook, and Engel (2017) used a focus group methodology to explore seminarians' perspectives on Catholic schools. In addition to their interests in serving in a parish with a Catholic school, the seminarians were asked about how their seminary programs had

helped them understand the role of the Catholic school and how their programs had prepared them to provide leadership for a parish with a Catholic school. The seminarians agreed that Catholic schools are valuable for the future of the Church and that time students spend in a Catholic school would have a greater impact on their faith formation. The seminarians were enthusiastic about potentially being involved with a Catholic school, but expressed concern about school finances and the time involved as a pastor to care for both the parish and the associated Catholic school.

The seminarians in Simonds et al.'s study (2017) reported that their seminary programs contained "virtually no academic content in the principles, history, purpose, or methods in PK-12 Catholic schools" (p. 104). This finding was corroborated by Boyle and Dosen (2017) who reviewed the course syllabi in 18 seminaries to determine how often specific references to Catholic schools occurred. They found that fewer than 10% of the syllabi contained any references to Catholic schools in their course descriptions, goals and outcomes, or assignments. In addition, over 70% of the syllabi contained no references even to catechesis. The authors concluded "... despite the great responsibilities parish priests have in the governance of parochial schools, there is little content available in priestly formation programs to help priests work effectively in their parish schools" (Boyle & Dosen, 2017, p. 121).

A renewed focus on priestly leadership is needed to help keep Catholic schools strong in the future. A study of the sentiments of seminarians toward Catholic schools is timely since, after years of decline, enrollments in seminaries have stabilized nationally and, in some dioceses, have increased. Boyle and Dosen (2017) and Simonds, et al. (2017) recommended that seminaries and Catholic institutions of higher education should collaborate on more intentional preparation of seminarians as Catholic school leaders. More research is needed to understand better the sentiments of the future clergy toward Catholic schools. This study is designed to add to that literature.

The following research questions informed this study:

- What value do diocesan seminarians place on Catholic schools?
- To what degree do diocesan seminarians believe Catholic schools are effective?
- How do diocesan seminarians view the financial support of Catholic schools?

## Method

### Population

The target population for the study consisted of seminarians from the 48 diocesan seminaries located in the 14 Episcopal Regions identified by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the North American College (NAC) in Rome, Italy. Seminary rectors were invited to distribute to their seminarians a link to an online survey soliciting their participation in the study. The participation of seminarians was voluntary and anonymous, and their results were confidential, conforming to the federal informed consent requirements for the protection of human subjects.

### Instrument

The online survey contained items from a survey of priests used by Convey (1999) and more recently by Nuzzi et al. (2008), along with the Awareness of God subscale from the Spiritual Assessment Inventory developed by Hall and Edwards (2002), demographic questions and questions about the seminary experience. In addition to factors not included in this article, the survey measured the sentiments of seminarians regarding the value of Catholic schools, their effectiveness, and the importance of supporting them financially.

The items for the three factors that constituted the outcome variables for the study utilized a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The final determination of the items that constituted each factor was based on the results of a factor analysis from the responses from a pilot study of seminarians in a selected diocese. The resulting factors were: Value (9 items, Cronbach's Alpha = .906), Effectiveness (11 items, Cronbach's Alpha = .916), and Financial Support (8 items, Cronbach's Alpha = .875).

Hall and Edwards (2002) developed the Spiritual Assessment Inventory to assess two dimensions of spiritual development: Awareness of God and Quality of Relationship with God. This study used the Awareness of God scale to measure how a seminarian perceives God working in his life and to determine how that awareness affects his perceptions of Catholic schools. The items from the Awareness of God scale had a five-point Likert scale: *Very True, Substantially True, Moderately True, Slightly True, and Not True at All.*

The demographic items included the seminarian's age, whether the seminarian was of Hispanic ethnicity, the seminarian's previous attendance at



Catholic elementary and Catholic high schools, whether the seminary program included some formal instruction in the form of workshops or classes about Catholic schools, and the seminarian's pastoral experiences in a parish with a Catholic school while in the seminary.

The findings of this study need to be interpreted in the light that the study was (1) limited to diocesan seminarians and did not include seminarians in religious orders, (2) not all diocesan seminaries agreed to participate in the study, (3) the participation of seminarians was voluntary, and (4) the seminarians that did respond may not have constituted a representative sample of all diocesan seminarians, thus limiting the generalizability of the study.

### Results

Three hundred sixty-one diocesan seminarians from the 14 Episcopal Regions and the North American College (NAC) in Rome responded to the online survey distributed in the fall of 2017 (see Table 1). Seminarians in at least one seminary from each USCCB region and the NAC participated in the study.

Table 1  
*Responses from Seminarians in Diocesan Seminaries*

Episcopal Region with Seminary	N	Percent Total	Seminarian Enrollment	Percent Responding
New England	11	3.0	199	6
New York	11	3.0	145	8
New Jersey, Pennsylvania	21	5.8	202	10
Maryland, District of Columbia	19	5.2	281	7
Louisiana	68	18.8	267	26
Michigan, Ohio	50	13.8	264	19
Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin	20	5.5	459	4
Minnesota	42	11.6	240	17
Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa	14	3.8	228	6
Texas	16	4.4	138	12
California	19	5.2	181	11
Oregon, Washington	11	3.0	80	14
Colorado	11	3.0	86	13
Florida	29	8.0	184	16
North American College, Rome	19	5.2	218	9
Total	361	100.0	3,172	11

*Note.* 2016-2017 enrollment



The responses represented approximately 11% of diocesan seminarians, using the enrollment of 3,172 in 2016-2017 obtained from Gautier and Holland (2017). The response rate of seminarians across the Episcopal Regions was not uniform, ranging from four percent in Region 7 (Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin) to 26% in Region 5 (Louisiana). The largest number of responses, 160 or 44% of the total responses, came from three regions: Region 5, (Louisiana), Region 6 (Michigan and Ohio), and Region 8 (Minnesota). These three regions also had the highest average response rate of 21% based on the enrollments from 2016 - 2017.

A majority of the seminarians who responded were Caucasian (84%), under the age of 30 (80.5%), and scheduled to be ordained in the next 4 years (58%). Slightly more than nine percent (9.4%) of the seminarians were of Hispanic ethnicity.

Sixty percent of the seminarians had attended a Catholic elementary or secondary school for at least some years; 40% had never attended a Catholic school. Slightly more than half (52%) had spent some years in a Catholic elementary school and 43% had spent some years in a Catholic secondary school. Approximately 41% of the seminarians attended Catholic elementary school for at least eight years and 38% attended Catholic high school for at least four years. Thirty percent had attended a Catholic college for at least some years prior to entering the seminary. The seminarians who responded are more likely than Catholics in the United States to have attended a Catholic school at some level and their attendance rates are similar to seminarians scheduled for ordination in 2017 who responded to a survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (Kramarek & Gautier, 2017).

Less than a third (29%) of the respondents indicated that their seminary had a curriculum and/or formation program that included information about Catholic schools. A majority (71%), however, did indicate that they had a pastoral experience in a parish that had a Catholic school.

### Outcome Measures

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the outcome measures and the correlations among them. Value and Financial Support had the highest means,  $\mu = 4.03$  and  $\mu = 4.02$ , respectively. The mean for Effectiveness was considerably lower ( $\mu = 3.29$ ).

Table 2  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for the Outcome Measures*

Outcomes	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations	
			Effective-ness	Financial Support
Value	4.03	0.72	.55	.67
Effectiveness	3.29	0.74		.32
Financial Support	4.02	0.67		

*Note.* Financial Support had the highest correlation with Value ( $r = .67$ ), but the lowest with Effectiveness ( $r = .32$ ). The correlation of Effectiveness with Value ( $r = .55$ ) was strong. All correlations were statistically significant at  $\alpha = .05$ .

### Value

The agreement of the seminarians to the items on the Value scale range from a high of 88% for Catholic schools being an essential part of the Church's mission to a low of 62% for the schools being the best means of evangelization in the Church today (see Table 3). The average agreement of the seminarians on the Value scale is 74%, comparable to the 73% for the priests in Convey's study (Convey, 1999). In addition, the distribution of agreement by seminarians across the nine items of the Value scale is very close to that of the priests in Convey's survey. The notable discrepancies are that the seminarians in this study are more favorable than the priests were in Convey's study that Catholic schools strengthen the bonds of unity within a parish and that the priests in Convey's study were more favorable toward the schools being the best means of religious education, in addition to the family, compared with the seminarians in this study.

### Financial Support

The seminarians are strong in their support that Catholic schools should be accessible in all parts of a diocese and their maintenance in poor areas a diocesan priority (see Table 4). They also are supportive of parishes providing financial support to schools and to parishioners who send their children to Catholic schools. The largest discrepancies between the seminarians and the priests who responded to Convey's survey are in making schools accessible in all parts of the diocese (seminarians had higher agreement) and parishes without schools financially supporting students from the parishes who attend Catholic schools (priests had higher agreement). The average agreement of the seminarians to the items measuring Financial Support, excluding the item about schools draining from the parish money that should be spent on other ministries, is similar to that of the priests, 77% versus 78%, respectively.

Table 3  
*Percentage of Seminarians Who Strongly Agreed or Agreed with Items Measuring Value Compared with Responses of Priests*

Item	Seminarians	Priests
Catholic schools are essential part of Church's mission	88%	87%
Need for Catholic schools is as great today as in the past	86%	84%
Maintaining schools is an effective use of resources	80%	69%
In addition to the family, the best means of religious education	74%	79%
Play an important part in the formation of parish leaders	73%	76%
Catholic schools strengthen bonds of unity within a parish	72%	65%
Catholic schools worth the cost to operate	69%	71%
Good sources for religious and priestly vocations	66%	61%
Best means of evangelization in the Church today	62%	66%

*Note.* Responses from 1,026 priests from May 1996 reported in Convey (1999).

Table 4  
*Percentage of Seminarians Who Strongly Agreed or Agreed with Items Measuring Financial Support Compared with Responses of Priests*

Item	Seminarians	Priests
Make Catholic schools accessible in all parts of the diocese	87%	76%
Maintenance in poor areas should be a diocesan priority	86%	82%
In areas with one school, all parishes in area should support	83%	83%
Parishes without schools should financially assist their students to attend a Catholic school	75%	87%
Financial support of Catholic schools is the duty of all Catholics	72%	71%
Every parish should provide financial support for Catholic schools	70%	72%
Having a school or financially supporting one, a parish priority	68%	n/a
Schools drain money that should be spent on other ministries	8%	34%

*Note.* Responses from 1,026 priests in May 1996 reported in Convey (1999).

### Effectiveness

The Effectiveness items measured both religious effectiveness and academic effectiveness. Six items on the Effectiveness scale assessed the perceptions of the seminarians about the religious effectiveness of Catholic schools and four measured their perceptions about the academic effectiveness of the schools (See Table 5). The agreement of the seminarians to the items measuring academic effectiveness is higher than their agreement on the items measuring religious effectiveness. Furthermore, the agreement of seminarians to the effectiveness items is substantially lower than the agreement of priests had been in 1996.

Table 5  
*Percentage of Seminarians Who Strongly Agreed or Agreed with Items Relating to the Effectiveness of Catholic Schools Compared with Responses of Priests.*

Item	Seminarians	Priests
Academic Effectiveness		
Catholic schools have high quality	59%	90%
Clear goals and priorities	53%	90%
Well-prepared and effective principals	54%	83%
Well-prepared and effective teachers	50%	84%
Religious Effectiveness		
Positive impact on adult religious behaviors of graduates	60%	72%
Establish a good foundation of moral and ethical values	48%	81%
Strong Catholic Identity	46%	77%
Effective programs of religious formation—elementary schools	40%	76%
Effective programs of religious formation—high schools	36%	64%
Teach Catholic doctrine effectively	32%	73%

*Note.* Responses from 1,026 priests in May 1996 reported in Convey (1999)

The lowest scores for Effectiveness occurs for the items measuring whether Catholic schools teach doctrine effectively and whether the schools have effective programs of religious formation. Overall, only 32% of the seminarians are in agreement that Catholic schools teach doctrine effectively, while 40% disagree and 28% are unsure.

**Catholic School Attendance**

Table 6 shows the means and standard deviations for Value, Effectiveness and Financial Support for those the seminarians who had attended a Catholic elementary or secondary school for at least some years and those that did not, as well as the multivariate and univariate significant tests between the means of both groups.

Table 6  
Means, Standard Deviations and MANOVA Results for Value, Effectiveness and Financial Support by Catholic School Attendance

Dependent Variable	Attended Catholic Schools				Univariate Results	
	Yes (n=214)		No (n=143)			
	M	SD	M	SD	F	Sig
Value	4.17	.674	3.81	.758	21.94	<.001
Effectiveness	3.31	.761	3.24	.720	0.65	.421
Financial Support	4.15	.645	3.82	.675	21.94	<.001

MANOVA Result: Wilks'  $\lambda = .918$ ,  $F_{3,353} = 10.5$ ,  $p < .001$

The seminarians that had attended a Catholic elementary or secondary school have more favorable sentiments regarding the value and importance of Catholic schools and the importance of financially supporting them than do seminarians who did not attend a Catholic school (see Figure 1). Both groups of seminarians have similar assessments of the effectiveness of Catholic schools. Effectiveness is the only outcome measure for which the difference between the seminarians who had attended Catholic schools and those who had not is not significant. This finding of no difference in the assessment of the effectiveness of Catholic school between the two groups of seminarians is the case for both attendance at Catholic elementary schools ( $F = 2.42$ ,  $p = .090$ ) and attendance at Catholic secondary schools ( $F = 1.81$ ,  $p = .165$ ).

In addition, the pattern of means in Figure 1 for the seminarians who attended Catholic elementary schools is similar to the pattern of those who attended Catholic high schools (see Table 7).

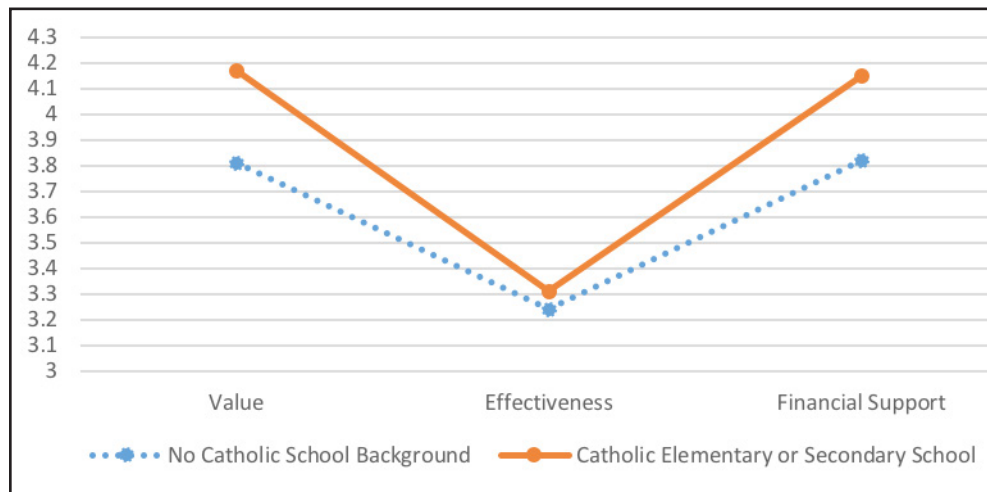


Figure 1. Seminarian Sentiments by Attendance at a Catholic School

Table 7  
Mean Scores by Level of Catholic School Attended

	Value	Effectiveness	Financial Support
Elementary School			
Four or More Years	4.25	3.25	4.22
Some Years	3.88	3.07	3.93
Never	3.84	3.25	3.84
Secondary School			
Four or More Years	4.25	3.37	4.21
Some Years	3.83	3.16	3.88
Never	3.87	3.22	3.89

### Hispanic Ethnicity

Table 8 shows the means and standard deviations for Value, Effectiveness and Financial Support for Hispanic and non-Hispanic seminarians, as well as the multivariate and univariate significant tests between the means of both groups.

Half of the Hispanic seminarians responding to the survey had attended Catholic schools while 61% of the non-Hispanic seminarians had done so. Hispanic seminarians have higher assessments of the effectiveness of Catholic schools than do non-Hispanic seminarians; however, like their non-Hispanic counterparts, their assessments of the effectiveness of the schools are significantly lower than their assessments of the value of Catholic schools and the importance of supporting them (see Table 8 and Figure 2). The Hispanic and non-Hispanic seminarians do not differ in their assessment of the value of Catholic schools and the importance of supporting them.

Table 8  
Means, Standard Deviations and MANOVA Results for Value, Effectiveness and Financial Support by Hispanic Ethnicity

Dependent Variable	Hispanic Ethnicity				Univariate Results	
	Yes (n=34)		No (n=325)		F	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD		
Value	4.18	.689	4.01	.732	1.67	p=.197
Effectiveness	3.62	.665	3.25	.745	7.82	p=.005
Financial Support	4.15	.670	4.01	.676	1.45	p=.229

MANOVA Result: Wilks'  $\lambda_{3,353} = .977$ ,  $F = 2.79$ ,  $p = .04$

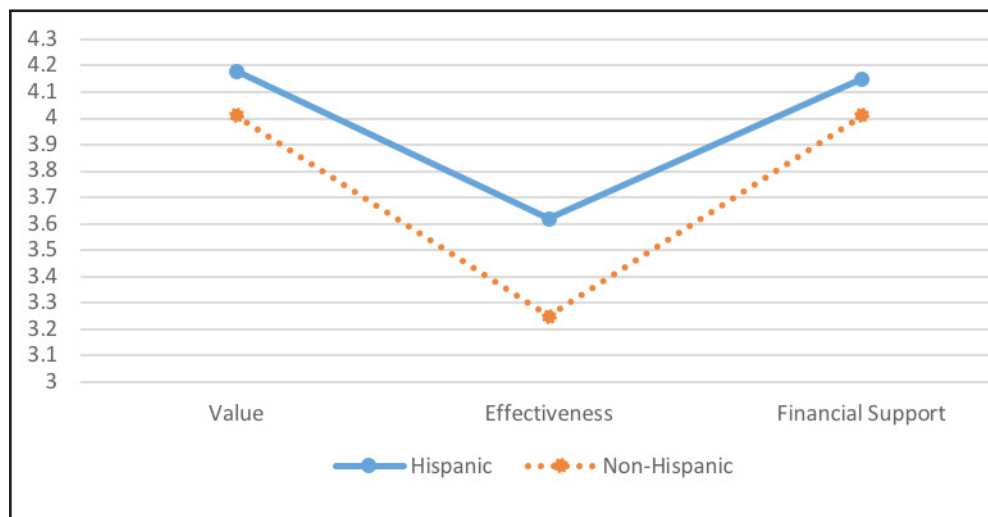


Figure 2. Seminarian Sentiments by Hispanic Ethnicity



### Most Important Purpose

The seminarians were asked to select the most important purpose of Catholic schools from among three choices: (1) Academic, (2) Religious, or (3) Academic and Religious Being Equally Important. Just over half (51%) of the seminarians indicated that the academic and religious purposes of a Catholic school are equally important, whereas just under a half (48%) selected a religious purpose as being most important. Only four seminarians selected an academic purpose as most important. Seminarians who saw a religious purpose and an academic purpose as equally important have more favorable sentiments regarding the value and effectiveness of Catholic schools and the need to support them than do the seminarians who selected a religious purpose as most important (see Table 9).

Table 9  
*Means, Standard Deviations and MANOVA Results for Value, Effectiveness, and Financial Support by Most Important Purpose of Catholic Schools*

Dependent Variable	Most Important Purpose				Univariate Results	
	Religious ( <i>n</i> =173)		Academic & Religious ( <i>n</i> =183)		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Value	3.86	.791	4.18	.632	17.14	<i>p</i> < .001
Effectiveness	3.03	.729	3.52	.679	41.69	<i>p</i> < .001
Financial Support	3.92	.711	4.11	.630	7.05	<i>p</i> < .008

MANOVA Result: Wilks'  $\lambda = .885$ ,  $F_{6,710} = 7.49$ ,  $p < .001$

Both groups of seminarians have more favorable responses for the academic effectiveness of Catholic schools than they do for the schools' religious effectiveness. However, the seminarians who indicated that the religious purpose of a Catholic school is most important are consistently less favorable than are the seminarians who thought that the academic and religious purpose of a Catholic school are equally important on both the academic effectiveness ( $\mu = 3.27$  versus  $\mu = 3.81$ ) and religious effectiveness of the schools ( $\mu = 2.84$  versus  $\mu = 3.37$ ).

For the seminarians who selected that the most important purpose of a Catholic school is a religious purpose, 53% disagree or strongly disagree and only 20% agree or strongly agree that Catholic schools effectively teach doctrine. For the seminarians who thought the academic purpose and religious purpose were equal in importance, 27% disagree or strongly disagree and 43% agree or strongly agree that Catholic schools effectively teach doctrine.

### Regression

A separate stepwise regression analysis was performed for each of the three outcome measures as dependent variables with seven predictors: age, Catholic elementary school attendance, Catholic high school attendance, Hispanic ethnicity, seminary pastoral experiences, seminary academic program, and Awareness of God. Table 10 shows the standardized regression coefficient (*Beta*), the results of the statistical tests, and the multiple correlation coefficient (*R*) and  $R^2$  for each of the regressions.

Three significant predictors of Value resulted: Catholic elementary school attendance ( $p = .013$ ), Catholic high school attendance ( $p = .047$ ), and Awareness of God ( $p = .004$ ). The importance of Catholic school attendance as a predictor of Value is consistent with the findings in Table 7. Value is the only outcome measure for which the Awareness of God is an important predictor. The Awareness of God variable has the highest correlation with age ( $r = .21$ ), indicating that the seminarians awareness of God increases with their age. The correlations between Awareness of God and the outcome variables are  $r = .20$  for Value,  $r = .17$  for Effectiveness,  $r = .11$  for Financial Support.

Table 10  
*Regression Analysis for the Outcome Measures*

Measure	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>R</i>	$R^2$
<b>Value</b>					
Catholic Elementary School	.163	2.49	.013	.323	.104
Awareness of God	.151	2.91	.004		
Catholic High School	.131	1.99	.047		
<b>Effectiveness</b>					
Age	.168	3.20	.001	.283	.080
Seminary Program	.137	2.63	.009		
Catholic High School	.132	2.53	.012		
Hispanic Ethnicity	.123	2.35	.020		
<b>Financial Support</b>					
Catholic Elementary School	.271	5.23	<.001	.271	.073

Four variables are significant predictors of Effectiveness: age ( $p = .001$ ), seminary academic program ( $p = .009$ ), Catholic high school attendance ( $p = .012$ ), and Hispanic ethnicity ( $p = .020$ ). Age had the largest *Beta* of .168, indicating that it is the best predictor of Effectiveness. Results of testing the

mean differences for Effectiveness by age groups show significant differences among the means ( $p = <.001$ ), with higher means for the older seminarians. Seminarians whose programs included some information about Catholic schools (seminary academic program) have more favorable assessments of the effectiveness of Catholic schools than do seminarians who are in seminaries that do not provide this content. The significance of Catholic high school attendance and Hispanic ethnicity is consistent with the results in Table 7 and Table 8, respectively.

Previous attendance at a Catholic school, particularly a Catholic elementary school, is the only significant predictor of Financial Support ( $p = <.001$ ). No other predictors entered the model. The average sentiment scores are highest for the seminarians who attended Catholic schools for all the elementary grades compared with the seminarians who did not attend Catholic elementary schools or who completed only a portion of their education in a Catholic elementary school.

### Other Findings

Table 11 shows the average agreement to items in additional factors resulting from the factor analysis. Two-thirds of the seminarians agree that there should be a place in Catholic schools for non-Catholic students. However, half of the seminarians also agree that non-Catholic students weaken a school's Catholic identity. Just over a third (36%) agree that parents should be involved in the governance of Catholic schools. Finally, only one-fifth of the seminarians agree with items measuring the value of parish religious education programs.

Table 11

*Percentage of Seminarians Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Selected Items*

Factors	Average Agreement
Catholic schools are better than public schools (single item)	68%
Support for Non-Catholics in Catholic Schools	67%
Parental Involvement in Governance of Schools	36%
Value of Parish Religious Education Programs	20%

### Discussion

The seminarians in this study are generally supportive of Catholic schools. They agree most with the value of Catholic schools (74% agree) and slightly less with the importance of financially supporting the schools (68% agree). A majority of the seminarians generally view that Catholic schools in their home diocese are better than public schools (68% agreement), have high quality (59% agreement) and have effective teachers and administrators (52% average agreement). The agreement of the seminarians with the value of Catholic schools and the importance of supporting them financially is similar to the priests' assessment of value and financial support from previous studies. These results, which suggest that seminarians are likely to continue to support Catholic schools after ordination, are encouraging.

The seminarians have substantially less agreement with the effectiveness of the schools (47% agree) than with the schools' value and importance of supporting them financially. Unlike the similarity between the sentiments of seminarians and priests regarding the value and financial support of Catholic schools, the differences between the seminarians' assessment of the schools' effectiveness and the assessment of priests 20 years earlier are substantial. The seminarians' sentiments are approximately 33 percentage points lower than the priests in their assessment of the four items that measure academic effectiveness and the five items that measure religious effectiveness, respectively.

Like the priests in earlier studies, the seminarians have higher average agreement regarding the academic effectiveness of Catholic schools than they do the religious effectiveness of Catholic schools. In terms of the religious effectiveness of Catholic schools, many of the seminarians in this study do not believe Catholic schools teach Catholic doctrine effectively (33% agreement) or have effective programs of religious formation (36% agreement for high schools; 40% agreement for elementary schools). On the other hand, despite their relatively low agreement with the items measuring the religious effectiveness of Catholic schools, the seminarians are generally more positive about the effectiveness of Catholic schools than they are about the effectiveness of parish religious education programs. Only one-fifth of the seminarians agree that parish religious education programs are effective. Finally, although the seminarians feel that too many non-Catholics weaken a school's Catholic identity, most believe that Catholic schools should welcome non-Catholic students.

The most revealing finding regarding the seminarians' sentiments toward the effectiveness of Catholic schools is related to their choice of the most

important purpose of Catholic schools: a religious purpose, an academic purpose, or both a religious purpose and an academic purpose equally. The seminarians who view a religious purpose as most important have lower sentiments toward all three outcomes variables than do seminarians who place equal importance on an academic purpose and a religious person. Compared with the seminarians who place equal importance on an academic purpose and a religious purpose, those who view a religious purpose as the most important reason for Catholic schools have substantially lower sentiments regarding the effectiveness of Catholic schools (Cohen's  $d = .70$ , a large effect size), as well as toward the value of Catholic schools ( $d = .45$ , a moderate effect size) and whether Catholic schools deserve financial support ( $d = .28$ )

The seminarians' agreement that Catholic schools deserve financial support is encouraging. Just as the bishops and others have recommended (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005; DeFiore, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2009), a majority of the seminarians believe that financial support for Catholic schools should be distributed among a range of stakeholders in the Catholic community. Almost three-fourths (72%) of the seminarians believe it is the duty of all Catholics to support Catholic schools regardless of whether they have children in the schools. Seventy percent believe that every parish should provide some financial support for Catholic schools, and roughly the same number believe that it should be a high priority for parishes to have a Catholic school or to financially support one. Almost 87% of the seminarians agree that Catholic schools in poorer areas should be a diocesan priority. A final indicator of the seminarians' support for the financial future of Catholic schools is their rejection of the idea that Catholic schools drain money from the parish that should be spent on other ministries.

Three factors influenced the sentiments of the seminarians in this study: (1) whether they attended a Catholic school, (2) their age, and (3) whether they are of Hispanic ethnicity. The seminarians who attended Catholic schools agree more strongly with the value of Catholic schools and the importance of financially supporting them compared with the seminarians who did not attend Catholic schools. The assessment of Catholic school effectiveness among all the seminarians, however, is lower than their assessment of value and financial support regardless of whether they attended a Catholic school. Seminarians who are older compared with younger seminarians have higher sentiments regarding the value of Catholic schools, the importance of supporting them financially, and their effectiveness. Hispanic seminarians

have higher sentiments about the effectiveness of Catholic schools than do non-Hispanic seminarians; however, like non-Hispanic seminarians, even the Hispanic seminarians have lower agreement about the effectiveness of Catholic schools than they do about the value and financial support of Catholic schools.

The regression findings reinforce the predictive influence of a Catholic school background on the sentiments of seminarians regarding the value, effectiveness and importance of financial support for Catholic schools. Having a Catholic school background, elementary, secondary or both, is an important predictor of each of the outcome variables. The age of the seminarian is also an important predictor of the effectiveness of Catholic schools consistent with the earlier finding that older seminarians have more favorable sentiments regarding the effectiveness of Catholic schools.

Two additional factors from the regression findings emerged as important: Awareness of God as a significant predictor of the value of Catholic schools, and the seminary's academic preparation as a significant predictor of the effectiveness of Catholic schools. Even though all the seminarians generally had high levels of Awareness of God, those with higher levels have a higher assessment of the value of Catholic schools than do the seminarians who scored lower on Awareness of God. In the case of their academic preparation in the seminary, the seminarians in seminaries that provide some exposure to Catholic schools in their academic programs have more favorable sentiments toward the effectiveness of Catholic schools than do the seminarians from seminaries that did not provide that exposure.

### **Implications for Practice and Further Research**

The main area of concern of the seminarians in this study is about the effectiveness of Catholic schools. A large part of this concern is rooted in whether Catholic schools effectively teach Catholic doctrine and have effective programs of religious formation. So, what's going on here? Are the perceptions of the seminarians based on their experience in a Catholic school or are their perceptions a function of their particular view of Catholicism and their own understanding of what constitutes a good Catholic school? Regardless, what people perceive or believe, whether formed by their own experiences or what they hear from others, often influence actions. Therefore, it is imperative that seminarians have the correct information about what Catholic schools are all about and how well the schools are doing academically and in their programs of religious formation.

Since the support of future priests is essential for the vitality of Catholic schools, ensuring that Catholic schools have a strong Catholic identity, teach Catholic doctrine effectively and have effective programs of religious formation is critical for their future health and success. Parents are not likely to pay tuition for Catholic schools unless they are confident that the schools have good academic and religious formation programs. Thus, dioceses and individual Catholic schools need to ensure that the academic and religious formation programs in the schools are strong. Evaluative studies of the Catholic culture, religion program and other aspects of religious formation in Catholic schools would enable diocesan officials, priests and parents to understand and promulgate the strengths of Catholic schools and help to uncover any weaknesses that should be addressed.

The findings of this study also have implications for the academic and pastoral preparation of seminarians. Seminaries need to provide some exposure to Catholic schools in their academic programs and in the pastoral placements of seminarians in parishes with Catholic schools during summer assignments. The data in this study show that experiences with Catholic schools during the seminary through their formal education and pastoral experiences with parishes that have Catholic schools are important to improved sentiments of seminarians toward the effectiveness of Catholic schools. The exposure to Catholic schools is particularly important, if, like in this study, only about half of the seminarians attended a Catholic elementary school for at least some years and the majority of the seminarians did not attend a Catholic secondary school. The academic program, either in coursework and/or professional development, should contain information about the history of Catholic schools, research about their effectiveness and Catholic identity, and the efficacious role that good lay participation on school advisory boards can play. The latter is particularly important in the light of the findings of this study that a majority of the seminarians disagree (47%) that Catholic schools should give parents greater policy control, and another 44% are uncertain, despite the reality that virtually all Catholic schools have boards dominated by lay members.

Clergy leadership is critical to the future of Catholic schools. The data and findings in this study support the recommendations in Simonds et al.'s study to improve seminary preparation for the future clergy to assume leadership and ministry roles in Catholic schools. The findings herein also support the view that "there is work that needs to be done in the area of training priests for their roles in Catholic schools" (Boyle & Dosen, 2017, p. 122).



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