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Review: Perceptions of Jesuit College and University Governing Board Effectiveness: Characteristics, Behaviors, and Mission Connections (2018)

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Review:
**“Perceptions of Jesuit College and University Governing Board Effectiveness:
Characteristics, Behaviors, and Mission Connections”**
by William Howard Johnson

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William Howard Johnson. “Perceptions of Jesuit College and University Governing Board Effectiveness: Characteristics, Behaviors, and Mission Connections.” Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2018. *ETD Collection for Fordham University*. AAI11786895. <https://fordham.bepress.com/dissertations/AAI10786895>

Johnson’s dissertation begins by noting that there has not been much study of the effectiveness of Jesuit college and university governing boards. The author proposes as remedy adapting to the Jesuit context the method of assessing board member perception of effectiveness developed by Holland, Chait and Taylor in 1989. He also recommends exploring how the characteristics of Jesuit higher education developed by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU)—particularly the first characteristic dealing with leadership’s commitment to mission—have influenced members of Jesuit higher education boards. Finally, the study seeks to determine whether there is a statistical correlation between the demographics of the respondents and their perceptions of board effectiveness.

Because of the decreasing number of Jesuits and increasing number of laypersons on boards of directors, and because governing boards need to undergo periodic self-study, it is imperative that we understand more clearly how board members at Jesuit colleges and universities perceive themselves in relation to the mission of their institutions.

The author acknowledges at the start three weaknesses of the study: (1) the small sample size, as only 108 board members participated in his project; (2) the statistics employed, which are nonparametric, thus requiring a larger sample size to yield the same level of statistical significance as parametric statistics; (3) the use of a borrowed questionnaire (see below).

In an extensive review of the literature, the author considers a series of topics: the early university, governance and governing boards, legal influence on Catholic higher education, theoretical framework, and characteristics of effective boards (contextual, educational, interpersonal, analytical, political, and strategic). No general conclusions or learnings are provided at the end of the review.

The methodology involved the adapted use of a questionnaire developed by Hamlet Canosa, Ed.D., which itself was derived from an instrument created by the National Board of Medical Examiners. Sixty-four statements from Holland, Chait and Taylor on board member perceptions of board effectiveness, which were also used by Canosa, were sent to the board members of the eleven (out of twenty-eight) Jesuit boards that agreed to disseminate the survey to their members. Three hundred forty-seven board members were approached, of which 31% (108) participated. The author indicates that this is a normal response rate for this type of inquiry.

Johnson explains in Chapter III, Methodology, how the research will proceed. The goal is to respond to five research questions, making use of the adapted questionnaire from Hamlet Canosa. The questions are listed below:

1. What demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, religion, laity or clerical status) are represented in Jesuit college and university governing board members?

2. What are the self-reported perceptions of board practices and behaviors made by Jesuit college and university governing board members?
3. What relationship exists between demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, religion, laity or clerical status) of Jesuit college and university governing board members and their perceptions of a select set of board practices and behaviors?
4. What are the self-reported perceptions of a select set of board practices and behaviors made by Jesuit college and university governing board members which pertain to the AJCU characteristics of Jesuit colleges and universities?
5. What relationship exists between demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, religion, laity or clerical status) of Jesuit college and university governing board members and their self-reported perceptions of a select set of board practices and behaviors which pertain to the AJCU characteristics of Jesuit colleges and universities?

Three types of information are to be offered in this study: demographic data, a report on perceptions of a select group of board members regarding sixty-four board practices and behaviors, and statistical analysis of possible correlations between the demographics of the respondents and their perceptions of board effectiveness. The research is descriptive in nature, an approach the author believes is appropriate given the fact that his work represents an initial study of board participation in Jesuit colleges and universities.

The respondents appear to believe strongly in the values, mission, and traditions of the college or university based on how much they agreed with several items on the survey instrument. They agree that their boards frequently discuss the values and mission of the institution. They frequently report experiences on their respective boards that involve the review of the governing board's performance,

although some responses suggest that boards need to address how they will manage their own mistakes and ill-advised decisions better. Their responses also indicate a need for improved training of new directors after they join their boards, and that assigning a mentor could happen more than it presently does. Particular responses may indicate a concern among respondents about the amount of attention their respective boards are giving to the future of the college or university. Short-term priority setting occurs for these respondents, and they perceive that great care is given to immediately pressing issues. They seem to appreciate the quality of communication on their boards and between the boards and those affected by their decisions.

The demographics of the respondents are presented in some detail:

- 72% between the ages of 50 and 69
- 89% white
- 79% male
- 91% Catholic
- 26% religious order membership
- 70% alumni/alumnae (of the schools on whose board they serve)
- 44% background in business
- 23% background in education

In terms of statistical correlations, only a few relationships between the demographic qualities of the respondents and their perspectives on board practices and behaviors were statistically meaningful. Years of board service showed up in the largest number of statistically significant relationships. In response to the survey statement that "most trustees on this board learn about their roles and responsibilities through explicit discussion, rather than relying solely on observation and formal discussions," gender seems to play a statistically significant role in the responses. The author believes that further study is needed to appreciate how gender considerations may help governing board members learn about and understand their roles on the board. Although impressed by the degree of awareness of mission among the board members who responded to the survey, the author highlights the evident lack of diversity with regard to race and gender on the boards.

One section of the work that could have been strengthened is the presentation of the stewardship theory of governance as distinct from a leadership theory. A number of authors favoring the former theory are quoted but without a clear presentation of the theory that inspired the quotations. This is unfortunate, because it is apparent that the author believes this theory makes an important contribution to our understanding of good governance and he states that the theory provided the underpinning of his own work. Summarizing learning from the literature review would also be helpful. In addition to improving these sections, better proofreading would enhance the reader's experience. The text is marred by a distressingly large number of typographical and spelling errors. This reviewer counted 67 in 107 pages of text.

This dissertation is a good first step in assessing the perceptions of members of boards of Jesuit colleges and universities, but clearly reveals that more research needs to be pursued. HJE