

Catholic Higher Education: the Untold Story

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In 1980, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement attesting to the important contributions of Catholic higher education.¹ The bishops' opening sentences were:

As we enter the twentieth decade of Catholic higher education in the United States, we wish to express in a formal fashion our profound gratitude and esteem for those in this ministry. They serve the entire American people in every field of learning. They also serve the Church in three indispensable ways. Catholic colleges and universities strive to bring faith and reason into an intellectually disciplined and constructive encounter. In addition, they are called to be communities of faith and worship. . . Finally, our schools are serving increasingly the educational needs of adults as they seek to advance their learning at various stages of their lives.²

Two decades later the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops again expressed "admiration and sincere gratitude" to all participating in Catholic higher education.³ I believe that the majority of American bishops still hold the nation's Catholic colleges and universities in high esteem even though, during the past year in particular, some bishops individually have been outspoken in criticizing a few institutions regarding a specific event or decision. It would be unfortunate, indeed, if the Catholic faithful were to infer from such incidents that

American bishops as a body have changed their mind about the worth of Catholic higher education.

Certain well-funded organizations external to the USCCB and to Catholic higher education have made it their purpose to convince bishops, priests, and the lay faithful that most of Catholic higher education is going astray. These critics typically view Catholic colleges and universities through a narrow lens focused on perceived imperfections in just a few areas tangential to the main work of any Catholic college or university (notably, one play, a few controversial commencement speakers or honorees, and isolated web content of an undesirable nature). Precisely because these critics' perceptions are skewed by limited observation and by a pre-ordained agenda, their widely disseminated but deficient accounts infect how Catholic higher education is viewed by all who have a stake in the enterprise.

My goal is to view Catholic higher education through a wider lens which captures, albeit in a summary way, the wide range of contributions Catholic higher education is making to the Church and to broader society. While readily admitting that Catholic colleges and universities have much yet to do to bring their Catholic mission to fulfillment, I wish to paint a fuller picture, the "untold story" about what is really happening on Catholic campuses across the nation. In this quick tour we can find at least a partial answer to Peter Steinfeld's question from 2005: "What, if anything, would be lost if on a given day the nation's 200-plus Catholic colleges and universities suddenly ceased to be Catholic?"⁴

Let us begin by celebrating the sheer size and scope of Catholic higher education in the United States. Although fewer than one-third of the 194 Catholic colleges founded before the year 1900 survived into the late 1950s, today there are nearly 220 Catholic colleges and universities with combined annual operating expenses of more than \$14 billion and net assets valued at nearly \$35 billion in fiscal year 2007.⁵ New institutions are being founded at a slightly faster rate than vulnerable old institutions are merging or closing.⁶ No other religious group in

the United States comes close to sponsoring as many institutions and no other nation can match the scope and variety of our Catholic post-secondary sector. We have two-year institutions, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, research universities, and freestanding professional schools. We have colleges with fewer than 100 students and universities with more than 20,000. Collectively we operate 28 law schools, 5 medical schools, 12 graduate nursing programs, 7 pharmacy schools, 7 schools of architecture, and 16 doctoral programs in theology, ministry, or religious studies. We offer online degrees, weekend programs, adult degree-completion options, and all manner of mid-career professional education.

Enrollment in Catholic colleges and universities is at an all-time high and continues to grow. In the year 1900, Catholic colleges taught 4,220 students, comprising 4.2% of all undergraduate, graduate, and professional students nationally.⁷ By 1950 the G.I. bill and rapid growth of women's colleges helped enrollment swell to more than 290,000 students. Today, only a little more than a half-century later, enrollment approaches 800,000 students and most Catholic institutions are planning for further growth. We intentionally teach significant numbers of first-generation learners, at-risk students, and students from lower-middle income families while also serving students of extraordinary ability with the means to go to any college of their choice. In short, we teach, serve and respect all who come to us, asking only that they respect our Catholic identity, strive to succeed, and pay their bills.

Two aspects of all this enrollment growth deserve special mention. First, more than half of all current U.S. Catholic colleges and universities and more than half of all U.S. colleges ever founded for women were created by communities of Catholic women religious.⁸ The first Catholic women's institution to open a baccalaureate program was the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in 1895, originally founded as an academy and still thriving as a college for women. The first Catholic women's college founded from whole cloth was Trinity Washington College in 1897, also still serving women. In contrast to these two institutions,

most women's colleges became co-educational after the late-1960s, although they retain their core charisms and distinctive attributes. Today Catholic colleges for women constitute 30% of all women's colleges in the United States and a slightly larger proportion of enrollment.

Another aspect of enrollment that deserves attention is the decline during recent decades in the proportion of students at Catholic institutions who are Catholic. If we focus on full-time, first-time freshmen at Catholic four-year colleges, the only group for which reliable time-series information about religious affiliation is available, we find that in ten-year intervals the proportion who self-report being Catholic declined from 82.0% in 1979, to 73.2% in 1989, to 66.2% in 1999, to 55.4% in 2009.⁹ These figures compare unfavorably to the proportion of Catholics currently enrolled in Catholic elementary/middle schools and high schools, 86.6% and 81.4% respectively.¹⁰ The *absolute* number of full-time undergraduate Catholics enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher learning has declined from approximately 259,000 in autumn of 1979 to approximately 230,000 in autumn of 2009, despite significant overall enrollment growth in these institutions.¹¹

This is a sobering trend and warrants careful study. On the other hand, the 11% decline in the number of full-time Catholic undergraduates on Catholic campuses is not nearly as pronounced as the 29% drop in absolute enrollment at Catholic high schools and 33% in Catholic elementary schools during the same period.¹² The conclusion is inescapable that Catholic families are not making the same decisions they used to make. Their commitment to Catholic education at all levels has diminished over time.

The causes of this trend are beyond the scope of my presentation, but I can find no convincing evidence that more than a small fraction of Catholic collegians who attend public or non-Catholic private universities do so because of adverse perceptions of Catholic colleges' religious characteristics. They choose institutions for different reasons, chiefly academic quality, affordability, and

accessibility, and access to particular courses of study. In 1989, the first year nationally weighted data became available, only 11.3% of first-time, full-time freshmen who attended Catholic colleges said that the “religious affiliation of the college” was “very important” in their decision to attend that institution. In 2009 the figure rose to 17.6%, reflecting either students’ slightly increasing interest in religion and/or institutions’ success in conveying their Catholic identity.¹³

Since the Catholic identity of our institutions is not among the most important considerations for most Catholic undergraduates and their families, we should not be surprised that approximately five-sixths of all Catholic freshmen attend non-Catholic institutions. Those who come to Catholic colleges do so for all the typical reasons and sometimes to take special advantage of what only a Catholic institution can provide. In sum, the proportion of full-time undergraduate Catholics at our Catholic colleges is shrinking, but a slightly higher percentage of them report that their institution’s religious affiliation is “very important.” I should add that we know relatively little about the religious affiliations and attitudes of graduate students and part-time undergraduates who, in any event, generally are presumed to fulfill their religious needs primarily in the communities where they live or work, rather than on campus.

Since almost half of all full-time undergraduate students at Catholic colleges are of other faiths or admit to no faith at all, how do or should we as Catholic educators feel about that? Frankly, we are divided on the matter. Some clearly deem it a travesty that the proportion of Catholic undergraduates is dwindling at Catholic colleges. Others work to sustain and strengthen the Catholic character of their institutions and hope indefinitely to attract a substantial proportion of Catholic students, but they focus most intently on serving well those who actually enroll. Still others see in the near parity of Catholic and non-Catholic undergraduates an exciting opportunity to bring the fruits of the Catholic intellectual and religious tradition to a broad cross-section of the nation’s future leaders, while teaching Catholic students to pursue the public good in cooperation with peers who hold different beliefs.

My own view is that all these standpoints have value and by embodying all of them in different institutions, we not only honor Jesus' injunction to "go and teach all nations"¹⁴ but we also provide opportunities for people at all stages of their faith walk to benefit from the educational programs, personal support, and Christian ethos which our varied Catholic institutions provide. No one institution or type of institution can do it all. Collectively, however, Catholic colleges and universities provide an exceptional array of educational opportunities for those who desire to take advantage of them.

If we assume that all Catholic institutions of higher learning provide a secular education of good to excellent quality, then our time will be best spent by focusing attention on the various ways in which we augment secular education with distinctively Catholic services, insights, and perspectives. More particularly, in what ways are we intentional, creative, and effective in expressing our Catholic identity? Pope John Paul II, in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, exhorted those of us working in Catholic colleges and universities to be more forthright and more centered on our Catholic identity. He urged us to consecrate our institutions "without reserve to *the cause of truth*" and to proclaim "*the meaning of truth*" by reference to Jesus as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." He called on Catholic universities to be in continuous renewal, both as "Universities' and as 'Catholic.'" He explicitly reminded us of our mission to bring the Good News to everyone.¹⁵

So how are we doing that? What exactly do we offer to Catholics and to others who come us as students, scholars, and co-workers? What do we offer that sets our institutions apart from most other colleges and universities? I submit that answers to these questions vary by institution and are profoundly affected by local factors including the particular legacy of founders, the quality of leadership over time, and the collective impact of the individuals who comprise a given academic community. That said, it is possible to provide a birds-eye view of initiatives and achievements of Catholic campuses on a national scale.

Let us begin with the central activity of any college or university – teaching and learning. This admittedly is difficult to characterize because of the vast range of subjects and pedagogical methods as well as the time-honored exercise of academic freedom in the classroom. We know that Catholic colleges and universities, unlike most other institutions, continue to value philosophy and theology as essential components of a liberal arts education. We also know that many Catholic colleges and universities are revising undergraduate core curricula to incorporate the Catholic intellectual tradition in greater depth. Recently ten medium-size Catholic universities collaborated on a project to refocus general education more precisely in relation to their campuses' Catholic mission.¹⁶ Of particular importance to them was stating mission-related learning objectives in practical terms which can be assessed. As another example, Cabrini College, not a part of this project, introduced a new mission-driven core curriculum this past autumn with the theme “Justice Matters.” Students take thematic and community engagement coursework with a focus on the common good, culminating in a capstone in their major field.¹⁷

Explorations regarding how the Catholic faith and intellectual tradition can appropriately enrich learning in major fields of study and in professional programs have become the focus of campus-based, regional, and national workshops. Among the national workshops are ACCU's *Collegium*, Fr. John Piderit's and Melanie Morey's “Substantially Catholic,” and an array of events held each year at different campuses, such as “*Transcending Borders: Catholic Social Thought in Teaching, Research, and Action*,” recently hosted by the University of San Diego. Recent and forthcoming issues of the *Journal of Catholic Higher Education*, along with studies published elsewhere, are documenting successful initiatives in specific disciplines, including law, business, and the health professions. For instance, eighteen Catholic business schools recently partnered in a summer conference entitled “Business Education at Catholic Universities,” the purpose of which was to consider how mission-driven business schools can overcome cultural and practical barriers to making better use of Catholic social teaching.¹⁸ ACCU's recently issued “Catholic Higher

Education and Catholic Social Teaching: A Vision Statement” is the work of more than 150 faculty from across the nation.¹⁹

Another area of curricular reform related to Catholic identity is the growth of undergraduate majors and minors in Catholic Studies. These vary widely in content and rigor but have one common purpose: to explicitly explore aspects of the Catholic intellectual, spiritual, and cultural traditions, often with an eye toward linking them to issues of social import. The oldest and most fully developed of Catholic Studies majors has been offered at the University of St. Thomas, MN, since 1993. Most Catholic studies students double-major. Seton Hall University also offers a major in Catholic Studies, started in 2003. Most institutions offer a minor rather than a major, in part because of resource limitations and in part because more students find it feasible and attractive to combine a minor in Catholic studies with a single major. At Canisius College students who minor in Catholic Studies are encouraged to supplement course work with internships at Catholic Charities, diocesan offices, or similar agencies. Aquinas College takes an interdisciplinary approach aimed at helping students explore “the beauty and diversity of the Catholic tradition.” The minor in Catholic Studies at Seattle University surrounds one required course with a rich selection of courses primarily from philosophy, theology, English, and history. Sacred Heart University offers a certificate in Catholic studies with the distinctive requirement that students submit a capstone paper explaining two major themes in the Catholic intellectual tradition or their personal understanding of one.

Faculty have always held the key to curricular reform. They must be capable and willing – and have a generous measure of grit and determination. The good news, as we know from the research of Jennifer A. Lindholm and Helen S. Astin, is that on average faculty at Catholic colleges rate higher on measures of spirituality than faculty at public or secular institutions. They also believe more firmly in the importance of developing students’ moral character and personal values. Faculty at Catholic colleges exceed faculty in all other types of institutions in acknowledging that their institutions place a high priority on promoting

students “religious/spiritual development.”²⁰ However, in situations where faculty outside of theology or religious studies are asked to emphasize Catholic teachings related to their discipline, many are reluctant to expose themselves to what seems like a risky proposition. In spite of their own faith, and sometimes because of its importance to them, many excellent faculty are reluctant to be drawn over intellectual terrain where students’ emotions run hot and the professors’ own catechetical training lacked sophistication.

As a result of this dynamic, Catholic colleges desirous of strengthening Catholic identity are exploring various ways to increase the proportion of Catholic faculty who both meet desired academic standards and care deeply about the Catholic educational mission. A relatively small number of institutions, including the University of Notre Dame, Boston College, the University of St. Thomas, MN, Villanova University, and many of the newly founded Catholic colleges, have developed “hiring for mission” programs that variously involve modified search protocols, enhanced hiring criteria, special incentives, or innovative methods of identifying exceptional candidates. On the administrative side, search firms are becoming more adept at identifying candidates who meet mission-sensitive criteria, although results remain uneven because the candidate “pool” is not as deep as it once was.

Another key aspect of the personnel project is helping current faculty and staff to understand more fully and become more energetically committed to what is distinctive about Catholic higher education. Orientation programs on almost every Catholic campus have been enriched to highlight the Catholic mission in practice and to encourage continuous reflection upon personal and institutional manifestations of Catholic identity. In addition, groups of affiliated institutions, such as the Mercy, Jesuit, and LaSallian associations, are investing in joint efforts to provide more effective orientation materials and programs both for new hires and for those interested in continuing formation. Boston College offers a week-long summer Institute for Administrators in Catholic Higher Education to help staff from across the nation understand better what it means to work in a

Catholic institution.²¹ Last year the University of Notre Dame hosted a summer executive seminar for trustees, “What We Hold in Trust,” to help them fulfill their fiduciary responsibility for the Catholic identity, character, and mission of their institutions.²² For those in campus leadership positions, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities offers the Rome Seminar each summer as a way for a delegation from U.S. Catholic higher education to converse directly with senior Vatican officials while also experiencing first-hand the Church’s spiritual and intellectual richness.²³

Another exciting manifestation of faith at work in our institutions is the rapid growth of Catholic research centers and institutes. The Institute of Catholic Studies at John Carroll University aims to deepen knowledge of how Catholicism and Catholics have interacted in the world. St. Joseph’s University established an Institute of Catholic Bioethics in 2006. The Garaventa Center at the University of Portland supports exploration of the intellectual interchange between Catholicism and culture. St. Thomas University’s Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law and Public Policy is exploring issues such as workers’ rights and family law. The Catholic University of America recently reconstituted its Life Cycle Institute as the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, with the stated purpose of analyzing public policy in the light of Catholic social thought. Neumann University had attracted a national following with its Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development. Saint Leo University sponsors a Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies. New centers continue to emerge at the rate of one very few months, a sure sign of the vitality of the Catholic educational mission. Taken as a whole, these institutes and centers constitute an extraordinary resource not available a generation ago.

The publishing arm of Catholic universities is yet another way in which the Catholic educational mission is fulfilled, not only by enriching scholarly activity on campuses but also by disseminating quality materials to a global audience. The largest Catholic university press in the world is the University of Notre Dame Press, overseen by faculty from numerous university departments. They have a

strong shelf list of titles concerning Catholic higher education. Sacred Heart University Press also regularly publishes titles concerning our immediate interests as Catholic educators. Other notable presses are those of Georgetown University, especially strong in public policy titles, Marquette University, with its Studies in Theology series, Duquesne University, Fordham University, and the Catholic University of America, which publishes the widest array of specifically Catholic titles.

If we open up the concept of publishing beyond books, we find many additional initiatives which reveal the creativity and unique contributions of Catholic higher education. Five examples will serve as illustrations. Boston College's C-21 program (short for the Church in the 21st Century) provides print materials as well as webcasts and online courses to members of its campus community and well beyond. Among its offerings this spring are 13 almost free online courses and 7 workshops on matters of faith.²⁴ A digital project of a different type is Villanova University's production of a virtual tour of the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the cathedral of Rome. It is now online at the Vatican. A unique project of a wholly different kind, sponsored by St. John's University and Abbey, is the production of the first handwritten, illuminated Bible in 500 years. It has been described by Pope Benedict XVI as "a great work of art...a work for eternity."

Still another fine example of Catholic scholarship in action is the Catholic Research Resources Alliance, a collaborative project initially of eight Catholic university libraries committed to digitizing, indexing, and making available on the internet countless rare documents housed in academic archives throughout North America. The "Catholic Portal," as it is called, although still in development, already makes available more than 33,000 items in twelve primary collection areas.²⁵ In the next stage, as more universities join the effort, we will have unprecedented global access to primary source materials heretofore little known or used. My final example is ACCU's own journal, which this year made the transition to a peer-reviewed format and a new title, the *Journal of Catholic*

Higher Education. The editor, Dr. Michael Galligan-Stierle, reports already seeing a notable increase in the range, quantity and quality of submissions.

All the examples mentioned thus far have concerned the intellectual life of Catholic colleges and universities, which is fitting. However, there also is new vitality in programs and services of a sacramental, spiritual, and ministerial nature. Perhaps there is no more visible indicator of this than the construction and major renovation of campus chapels. Sacred Heart University just opened the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, a \$17 million facility, and Thomas Aquinas College, CA, built a \$23 million chapel recently. I understand that other new chapels are underway or in the planning stage at the University of Dayton, Xavier University, and Salve Regina University. Major renovations have been undertaken within the past few years at Seton Hall University, Loyola University Chicago, and St. Thomas University, MN, to name but a few.

Campus ministry programs, variously named, also are expanding in scope and effectiveness. Growing investments in campus ministry programs are making available additional opportunities for Mass, Reconciliation, retreats, private spiritual counseling, and RCIA. Traditional devotions such as adoration are making a modest comeback, too. The clergy shortage is the main impediment to further expansion of liturgical and sacramental services for students.

A few examples will suffice to illustrate some new and innovative approaches to fostering students' spiritual development. To encourage spiritual meditation, Merrimack College built a stone walk patterned after a 13th century labyrinth found in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France. Fairfield University has developed a certificate program to prepare those directing Ignatian spiritual exercises. St. Mary's University, TX, has developed a video in which faculty connect their teaching to the institution's Catholic and Marianist mission. DeSales University sponsors a Center for Discernment to help students consider some form of religious life. Chestnut Hill College has created a Garden of Forgiveness near the center of its campus.

These creative projects admittedly are at the periphery of the sacramental, liturgical tradition of Catholicism. Yet, it is precisely through such means that some disaffected Catholics can be enticed back to their faith, or others invited to it. Most colleges also run community service programs through campus ministry, in part to encourage reflection upon the spiritual values embedded in volunteerism and social justice. In the end, Christianity is invitational. We believe that if we build it, people will come – whether it be a new chapel, a new path, or a new program.

Success in campus ministry or in other areas of student affairs work requires creativity, endless vigilance, and an ability to overcome exhaustion when facing yearly waves of new students. At nearly two-thirds of Catholic colleges and universities support comes from above in the form of mission offices generally created within the past decade, according to a just-released study by Michael James of Boston College.²⁶ Mission leaders report directly to the president in nine of ten cases, which gives them ready access to information, influence, and resources. Help also comes from outside in the form of professional organizations such as the Catholic Campus Ministry Association and the Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. ASACCU, ACCU, and the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators collaborated in 2007 to produce a helpful booklet entitled *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities*, available through ACCU. At present the same groups are developing materials to help Catholic institutions assess the effectiveness of student affairs programs relative to the principles previously enumerated. Also helpful are symposia and workshops for campus ministers, such as those being held this year at the University of Notre Dame and St. Joseph's University, PA. Mission officers have been meeting annually since 2003 in connection with ACCU's Annual Meeting.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, urged that the Gospel message be treated not only as “informative” but also as “performative.” That is, the Gospel once understood also should change lives and societies for the better. Catholic colleges and universities attempt to make this connection manifest through myriad programs and services which bring intellectual and other campus resources into contact with external communities and social issues.

A noteworthy recent example is the Room at the Inn, a project of Belmont Abbey College to provide a faith-rich residence for women from any school in the region who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant. Barry University operates an Institute for Hispanic/Latino Theology and Ministry to prepare lay ministers for the Church. Stonehill College sponsors a Center for Nonprofit Management, which seeks to build leadership capacity within non-profit community agencies in the region, much like the older Egan Urban Center at DePaul University. Santa Clara University students perform Shakespeare for and with prison inmates. Villanova University students intern in offices at the Vatican, providing help to thinly staffed offices while introducing students to the work of the Church. These examples, and a hundred others of equal merit, are not random acts of kindness. They are planned manifestations of our institutions’ Catholic mission.

One form of institutional outreach where Catholic colleges and universities excel is in serving Catholic K-12 schools and diocesan offices of Catholic education. Although a Notre Dame survey of Catholic pastors with parish schools found that only 17% reported having a relationship with a Catholic institution of higher education, a 2008 survey of ACCU members found that of 113 institutions responding, 94 offered one or more academic programs specifically designed for Catholic school personnel and 99 provided one or more pro-bono services to Catholic schools or diocesan offices of education.²⁷ For example, five Catholic institutions in the Milwaukee Archdiocese are working jointly to strengthen Catholic K-12 schools and a similar consortium is at work in the Boston Archdiocese. At least 30 Catholic colleges and universities comprising the Association of Catholic Leadership Programs provide training for principals and

superintendents of Catholic schools. The apparent disparity between the Notre Dame and ACCU reports most likely is due to the fact that most Catholic high schools are not proximate to Catholic colleges and they outnumber the colleges by a ratio of 5:1.

So what does all this add up to? If we ran the table on examples of Catholic identity in action, what impact does it all have on students? Here we do not have tidy answers, since each student reacts in unique ways to the opportunities and challenges presented by any given campus. The influence of a single professor, staff member, or group of student peers can be decisive. At present about 65 Catholic colleges and universities, all members of the Catholic Higher Education Research Cooperative, are working to develop methods of assessing student learning outcomes and campus dynamics specifically related to Catholic mission. We will know more five or ten years from now when these and other promising research programs begin to yield time-series results.

Most of the national research concerning students attending (or graduating from) Catholic colleges and universities has been conducted by secular organizations. As a result, the research questions, measures, variables, and interpretations provided are often imprecise from a distinctively Catholic perspective. In general, however, such studies show that the typical Catholic undergraduate student at a Catholic institution emerges more spiritually intact than if she or he had attended a public or secular private institution, although not as spiritually active as would have been the case a few decades ago. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate's just released reanalysis of freshman-to-junior data from 148 U.S. colleges shows that, in their words, "students self-identifying as Catholic at Catholic colleges and universities remain profoundly connected to their faith in their junior year."²⁸

CARA found net student movement toward Church teachings in many areas such as the death penalty, gun control, reduction of military spending, and improving the human condition but away from Church teachings in matters relating to

abortion and same-sex marriage. Mass attendance declined during the college years among almost a third of Catholics at Catholic colleges but among almost half of Catholic undergraduates at other institutions. The study also found that from the freshman year to the junior year, 8% of all freshmen at Catholic colleges left the faith after entering as Catholics and 4% of all freshmen converted to Catholicism after entering as non-Catholics. Since the study additionally found that Catholics who left their faith in college were most likely to disagree frequently with family members about religion and struggled with suffering or the death of a family member or friend, it seems likely that factors not within colleges' control are adversely affecting some students' faith in significant ways. It should be noted that in all these measures, results were more positive (or less negative) for Catholics attending Catholic colleges than for Catholics attending other institutions.

Disturbing as these figures are, they should not be a surprise and should not be interpreted as a specific outcome of students' attendance at a Catholic college or university. The primary causes are elsewhere and are known: weakened family life and diminished religious activity among Catholic families; ineffective catechesis in many parishes and understaffed faith formation programs for youth; pervasive secular content in all media; digital distractions of every type; rampant individualism often unchecked by sound moral training; a sexually provocative culture; and a Church scarred by the sex-abuse scandal. Catholic campuses serving a broad cross-section of students can only do so much to redress such a collection of antithetical influences, and we know full well that our own capacity in some ways is weaker now than it was when priests and vowed religious were more numerous on our campuses.

A baseline to keep in mind when judging the impact of Catholic colleges on Catholic students is that only 30 percent of all adult U.S. Catholics attend weekly Mass. CARA has estimated from seven national surveys that this figure drops to 26 percent for Catholics who attended non-Catholic colleges and rises to 39 percent for those who attended Catholic colleges.²⁹ Gallup poll data over a half

century show that among adults ages 18-29, weekly Mass attendance was almost three times as high in 1955 as it is today. Given that only a fraction of these adults ever attended a Catholic college, it is clear that the problem is Church-wide and reflective of broad societal trends.

Against this backdrop, one other factor should be noted. Most young adults of typical undergraduate age go through a period of faith attenuation regardless of whether or where they go to college. It is a stage of life in Western society in which young women and men instinctively push against authority figures and dominant institutions as they go about finding their own social, intellectual, and spiritual footing. We in Catholic higher education must continue to offer spiritual guidance and sacramental opportunities to students of all types and ages, but we also must humbly accept that the invitation to faith comes from God and cannot be forced upon adults, no matter how lofty our intentions are.

An inherent shortcoming of many surveys of current students is that many of the positive faith-related effects of Catholic higher education emerge only five to ten years after graduation. Alumni of Catholic colleges generally report having had positive faith experiences at our institutions. A study by Hardwick Day Consulting in 2006 found that Catholic alumni from Catholic colleges were four times more likely than Catholics attending secular private institutions and eleven times more likely than Catholics attending public institutions to say that they benefited from campus-based opportunities for spiritual development. Four-fifths of all alumni from Catholic colleges, not just Catholics, reported that their campus experiences helped them develop moral principles.³⁰ CARA studies previously cited also found that adults who had attended Catholic colleges or universities were considerably more likely than other Catholics to volunteer in parishes and to donate to the Church's annual appeal. A more recent CARA report found that adults who attended Catholic colleges are notably more likely than those who had enrolled elsewhere to observe Lenten practices.³¹

This has been a long walk around the barn to make a single point. The apostolate of Catholic higher education is critical to the Church and a vital national resource. It also is a complex enterprise rife with challenges, filled with promising initiatives, and never fully achieved. The situation is not nearly as bleak as certain critics claim, nor as rosy as bishops and Catholic educators and parents would like. On balance, however, Catholic colleges and universities are working very hard and increasingly effectively to be academically rigorous and faithfully Catholic. Like the Church itself, Catholic higher education is swimming upstream in a culture which has other priorities.

We will never reach a realistic sense of Catholic higher education's achievements and remaining challenges unless we take accurate measure of what already is working well or is in a promising stage of development. To direct disproportionate public attention to a few areas of difficulty is to court discouragement and mislead those who lack information about other aspects of Catholic higher education. My goal in this address has been to highlight aspects of Catholic higher education which routinely get too little attention outside the halls of the academy.

Telling the national story of Catholic higher education should be the task of all campus presidents, sponsors, trustees, and bishops. If those in leadership positions do not speak about Catholic higher education in terms that go beyond the particulars of individual institutions or problematic incidents, others who are less well informed and often less judicious will dominate the national conversation about our work and our future. We simply cannot continue to let this happen. I firmly believe that the best days for Catholic higher education lie ahead. Catholic higher education, including old and new institutions, has an exciting story to tell and a very promising future. We have a God-given mission, a proud legacy, unprecedented resources, and an ace in reserve in Jesus' promise, "I am with you always" (Mt. 28:20).

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- ¹ The following reflections are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of ACCU's member institutions, Board of Directors, or staff.
- ² "Catholic Higher Education and the Pastoral Mission of the Church" (1981) in Alice Gallin, ed., *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents, 1967-1990* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 135.
- ³ USCCB, "The Application of *Ex corde Ecclesiae* for the United States" (May, 2000), in *Catholic Identity in Our Colleges and Universities: A Collection of Defining Documents* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), p. 76.
- ⁴ "What if There Were No Catholic Higher Education: A Personal Keynote," unpublished address to the Institute for Administrators in Catholic Higher Education, Boston College, July 11, 2005.
- ⁵ Historical data from Edward J. Power, *A History of Catholic Higher Education in the United States* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), Appendix B (excluding the few women's colleges founded before 1900). Financial figures are summations of data submitted to NCES by 200 Catholic colleges and universities for fiscal year 2006-07, the most recent available for public analysis.
- ⁶ Roughly one-tenth of Catholic colleges in existence at the time of Edward Power's 1958 study closed or merged by 1985. Since then the failure rate has decreased and after 1990 new Catholic colleges have been founded at the rate of approximately one every two years.
- ⁷ Philip Gleason, "American Catholic Higher Education: A Historical Perspective," in Robert Hassenger, ed., *The Shape of Catholic Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 19.
- ⁸ Thomas M. Landy, "The Colleges in Context," in Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett, *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) p. 55.
- ⁹ Data taken from the annual reports of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles. Reported figures are weighted to redress sampling effects.
- ¹⁰ Dale McDonald, PBVM, and Margaret M. Schultz, *Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2008-2009* (Arlington, VA: NCEA, 2009).
- ¹¹ These numbers are calculated by multiplying the full-time undergraduate headcounts reported by Catholic colleges and universities to the National Center for Education Statistics by the proportion of first-time, full-time freshmen self-reporting as Catholic. While the resulting numbers are only approximations, they are sufficiently accurate for the present purpose.
- ¹² Interval data derived from 1978-79 figures from Frank H. Bredeweg, *Catholic High Schools and Their Finances*, 1980 (Washington, DC: NCEA, 1980) and Frank H. Bredeweg, *Unites States Catholic Elementary Schools and Their Finances, 1988* (Washington, DC: NCEA, 1988). 2008-09 figures from McDonald and Schultz, *op cit*. The decline of K-12 Catholics would be slightly higher if the rising proportion of non-Catholics in Catholic schools were included.
- ¹³ See note 9.
- ¹⁴ Mt. 28:10.
- ¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Eccelsiae*, (1990), reprinted in *Catholic Identity in Our Colleges and Universities: A Collection of Defining Documents* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2001) Introduction, numbered paragraphs 4, 7, 10, emphases in original.
- ¹⁶ John P. Nichols, *A United Endeavor: Promising Practices in General Education at Catholic Colleges and Universities* (privately printed, 2009), PDF version available free of charge at www.saintjoe.edu as "PGEM booklet."
- ¹⁷ For details see <http://www.cabrini.edu/default.aspx?pageid=301>.
- ¹⁸ For conference papers see <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/CST/conferences/becu/default.html>.
- ¹⁹ For a copy printable tri-fold brochure see http://www.accunet.org/files/public/CST_Brochure.pdf.
- ²⁰ "Understanding the 'Interior' Life of Faculty: How Important is Spirituality?," *Religion & Education*, 33:2 (Spring 2006), pp. 64-90; also Jennifer A. Lindholm, "The Role of Faculty in Students' Spiritual Development" (undated).
- ²¹ <http://www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/cce/highered/iache.html>.
- ²² <http://www.nd.edu/~icl/trustees/home.html>.

²³ <http://www.accunet.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3481>.

²⁴ <http://www.bc.edu/sites/c21online/>.

²⁵ <http://www.catholicresearch.net/>.

²⁶ “Mission Matters: A National Study of Mission Leaders and Mission Units in Catholic Higher Education,” presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, January 31, 2010.

²⁷ Ronald J. Nuzzi, James M. Frabutt, and Anthony C. Holter, *Faith, Finances, and the Future* (Notre Dame, IN: Alliance for Catholic Education Press, 2008), p. 46; ACCU/NCEA, “Journeying Together: Catholic Higher Education and Catholic K-12 Schools in Collaboration,” <http://www.accunet.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3591>.

²⁸ Mark M. Gray and Melissa A. Cidade, “Catholicism on Campus: Stability and Change in Catholic Student Faith by College Type,” presentation at Annual Meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, January 31, 2010, p. 19.

²⁹ “Catholic Colleges and Universities: A Profile of Institutional and Survey Data” (unpublished report, June 2007).

³⁰ “Values that Matter: Differentiating Catholic Colleges and Universities Through Comparative Alumni Research” (unpublished study commissioned by the National Catholic College Admission Association) http://www.accunet.org/files/public/Values_That_Matter.pdf, pp. 8 & 10.

³¹ http://www.accunet.org/files/public/CARA_Sacraments_Study.pdf.
