

Measuring Catholicity on Campus: A Comparative Example at Four Colleges¹

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Abstract

More than 200 American colleges and universities call themselves Catholic. This affiliation contains surprising variability in its organizational and cultural manifestations, as well as its adherence to Church teachings and practices. Prospective students, parents, alumni, benefactors, accrediting agencies, and Church leaders all have an interest in gauging the effective “Catholicity” of an institution. However, there are no easy metrics to separate the most “orthodox” from the most secular, and public reputations are often misleading. This article suggests that one way to assess an institution is to go directly to the students with carefully designed surveys of religious beliefs and practices. The author describes one such effort that compares representative samples of Catholic students on four Catholic campuses. The results demonstrate that even fairly subtle differences in Catholicity among the institutions are empirically measurable and potentially useful. The recent history, benefits, and limitations of such benchmarking are also discussed.

There is no shortage of ranking systems for America’s colleges and universities—from academic competitiveness to qualities as a party school—but we have yet to rank Catholic colleges along the religious dimension. There are about 220 Catholic colleges in America, representing a range of religiousness and Catholicity. A few colleges are recognized for their strict observance of Catholic orthodoxy while others are criticized for being barely distinguishable from secular institutions. Alumni magazines periodically feature articles such as “How Catholic is Notre Dame?” or “Religion on Campus: Addressing Change.” Several recent books have described the variability in religiousness on religiously affiliated campuses.^{1a} In light of increased pressures from Rome, differences in a college’s Catholicity may become more than just an academic exercise.

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¹ Although this article appears in this Summer 2009 issue, please note that it was originally written in 2008.

^{1a} Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); Conrad Cherry et al., *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill: University

The perception is that colleges which fail to meet certain standards may be stripped of their right to use the title of “Catholic.”

After a brief look at recent thinking on the subject, this article summarizes a preliminary attempt to measure differences in religiousness at four Catholic colleges. It does so by focusing not on institutional mission statements and rationales—however inspiring—but rather on the ultimate measure of an institution’s success and failure in this area: the religious beliefs and practices of its students.

For obvious and important reasons, American Catholic colleges and universities invest a great deal of energy in attempting to understand and articulate what constitutes “true Catholic identity.” Pope John Paul II’s 1990 *Ex corde Ecclesiae* offers valuable guidance, as did two other papal addresses which focus on the nature and mission of Catholic universities.²

In 2004, the Holy See reminded Catholic educators that bishops have the responsibility to decide whether or not a college may call itself Catholic. The following year, Archbishop J. Michael Miller, Secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, gave an important speech at the University of Notre Dame that addressed speculations about possible future directions in Catholic higher education.³ In trying to give a glimpse into the Church of Pope Benedict XVI, Archbishop Miller cited Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s belief that “...it might be better for the Church not to expend her resources trying to preserve institutions, whether universities, hospitals or social service agencies, if

of North Carolina Press, 2001); Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, S.J., *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Naomi Schaeffer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2005).

² *Ex corde Ecclesiae* described the Catholic university as “an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities” (paragraph 12). John Paul II’s 1988 earlier address to the American Bishops and the most recent remarks by Pope Benedict XVI (2008) at the Catholic University of America both emphasized the role of the Catholic university in evangelization and acts of faith. For example, in the former, John Paul II spoke of the mission of Catholic colleges and universities as providing “...a public, enduring and pervasive influence of the Christian mind in the whole enterprise of advancing higher culture, and to equip students to bear the burdens of society and to witness to their faith before the world.”

³ J. Michael Miller, C.S.B., “Challenges Facing American and European Catholic Universities: A View from the Vatican” (paper presented at the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, October 31, 2005).

their Catholic identity had been seriously compromised.”⁴ Cardinal Ratzinger, according to Miller, had emphasized several times the importance of Catholic institutions, but also declared that “...the capacity for self-moderation and self-pruning is not adequately developed”⁵ and “...a time of purification lay ahead for the Church.”⁶ The debate over Catholic identity, Archbishop Miller states,

...presumes that the Pope and the bishops want to preserve all the Church’s institutions of higher education; that she has, if you will, a vested interest in their continuance. But what if that presumption is mistaken? The views previously expressed by Cardinal Ratzinger at least suggest that it might possibly be.⁷

Too much of the current debate over Catholic identity, the Archbishop believes, is sterile and instead should focus on the simple question of “how does a Catholic university honestly and effectively provide a Christian presence in the world of higher education? The burden of proof now falls on the university itself.”⁸

While such thoughts inevitably left a few Catholic educators wondering what metrics of Catholic identity might be used and which institutions might be pruned, Archbishop Miller, a great supporter of Catholic higher education, reminds us that the Church works prudently and incrementally over the centuries. Dramatic changes would be unlikely.⁹ In the April 2008 “Address to Catholic Educators,” Pope Benedict XVI did much to assuage the fears of many Catholic educators.¹⁰ His deep affection and support for Catholic higher education was evident, and he repeatedly underscored the importance of educational institutions. Such enthusiasm echoed another powerful endorsement of Catholic higher education, made 18 years earlier in *Ex corde Ecclesiae* by John Paul II: “...a Catholic university is without any doubt one of the best instruments that the church offers to our age...”¹¹

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Address to Catholic Educators” (presented at The Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008, <http://www.zenit.org/rssenglish-22328>).

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990), paragraph 10.

In an interview with Vaticanologist John Allen,¹² Archbishop Miller suggested various possibilities for forming “benchmarks” of Catholic identity—a way of thinking, he notes, that is particularly at home in American higher education where outcome assessments have been institutionalized in various forms. According to Allen, some of Archbishop Miller’s benchmarks could be institutional, such as the percentage of Catholic faculty and trustees, and a curriculum that is consistent with Catholic tradition; but, other benchmarks of an institution’s Catholicity could be gauged, he suggested, by considering the students themselves: Do they have an active sacramental and devotional life? Do they pray, attend Mass, and show an interest in vocations? Do they change their religious and doctrinal attitudes over time? Do they show a concern for social justice? Peter Steinfels recently suggested that some of the questions should be asked in the negative: “...what would constitute failure?”¹³ Suppose, for example, that most students graduated with less commitment to Catholicism than they had when they entered, or that fewer went to Mass as seniors than as first year students?

The use of religious benchmarks is controversial, and the potential for misuse is great. One does not have to look further than the discussions following the 1990 release of *Ex corde Ecclesiae* to see the challenges in operationalizing the very definition of a Catholic college or university. Melanie Morey and John Piderit, in their book on Catholic higher education, called the years following 1990 “...a rancorous ten-year discussion...that kept the question of Catholic identity and culture center stage in rather contentious fashion.”¹⁴ Archbishop Miller is clearly sensitive to the dangers of such controversy. “It’s not a matter of ‘scoring’ institutions, but providing basic data that, taken together, may point up areas that need attention Even there, you’d have to do studies over time, comparing a group when they come in as freshmen and when they leave as seniors...so it’s a complex analysis.”¹⁵

Miller’s benchmarks may have promise, if only for internal diagnostic purposes. Student surveys are already widely used, as part of an institution’s outcome assessment, to measure whether or not it is

¹² John L. Allen Jr., “Benchmarks of Catholicity for Universities,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 8, 2005.

¹³ Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 114.

¹⁴ Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*, 10.

¹⁵ Allen, “Benchmarks of Catholicity.”

meeting various goals, including those related to mission. Accrediting agencies already require some evidence of mission effectiveness, and it is not unreasonable for prospective students, parents, and benefactors to demand reliable information about the product they are buying and supporting. Such data also could be used for internal evaluation by the sponsoring religious orders, trustees, campus ministry, and perhaps other institutional departments as well. The results may either surprise or confirm, but good data is difficult to ignore.

It is likely that Catholic colleges have never been more important to the future of the Church. The contribution of America's network of Catholic colleges is unique in the world and a vital part of the Church infrastructure. This refers not just to the intellectual contributions of the faculty, but also to the students themselves. Today's college graduates will be the future leaders of the Church.

The important role that Catholic colleges and universities have made to today's adult Catholics hardly needs emphasis, but a recent survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) documented an impressive list of characteristics that were cultivated among adults who attended Catholic institutions.¹⁶ According to the survey, those who had attended Catholic colleges or universities were more likely to:

- Consider themselves to be practicing Catholics;
- View the sacraments as "essential" to their faith;
- Say that the Mass is "very important" to their religious practice;
- Have considered becoming a priest, brother, nun or religious sister;
- Report that they are "proud to be Catholic";
- Say that "helping the poor and needy" is a moral obligation;
- Follow various Lenten practices.¹⁷

However, even recognizing the influential role of Catholic higher education, the challenges to American Catholicism are sobering. Consider the list of new social realities that have confronted the Church in the last few decades: the closing of parochial schools, the heavy loss of priests and religious, the financial crises of dioceses, and the diminishing commitments of parents to raise their children in the Church. When we add in the fact that many Catholic teachings are increasingly

¹⁶ Mark M. Gray and Paul M. Perl, *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics*, (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate). <http://cara.georgetown.edu/sacramentsreport.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

incompatible with the ethos of the dominant culture (gender issues are a conspicuous example, but so are trends toward moral relativism and individualism), and then factor in the erosion of moral credibility as a result of scandal revealed among a minority of priests, one can begin to understand both the importance of, and challenge to, Catholic colleges in their attempts to preserve and enhance the Catholic faith of their students. Despite the increased need for a strong Catholic identity that can be cultivated in Catholic higher education, the 2008 CARA report documents the declining proportions of American Catholics who have attended any type of Catholic institution.¹⁸

The result of these converging trends can be seen in the latest Pew national study of the diverse landscape of American religions, in which "...Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic."¹⁹ Finally, when comparing Catholic college students to older generations of Catholics, one article found little reason to think that this generation of college students is going to reverse the trends that started before they were born.²⁰

Review of Literature

The most recent attempt to analyze Catholic higher education was undertaken by Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, S.J.²¹ Their focus is cultural, with qualitative research based on lengthy interviews with 124 senior administrators at 33 Catholic campuses. Their evidence is compelling and captured in the theme of their title: "Catholic Higher Education: a Culture in Crisis." The Catholic culture that these administrators experience every day, they tell us, "does not measure up to their own convictions about how things should be" and "generally speaking, most administrators in the end admitted that their colleges and universities had rather weak Catholic cultures."²² Furthermore, they report that most administrators are at a loss about how to address the problem.

¹⁸ Gray and Perl, "Sacraments Today."

¹⁹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, (March 29, 2009), <http://religions.pewforum.org/>.

²⁰ Vincent Bolduc and William V. D'Antonio, "The 'Bookend' Generations." *National Catholic Reporter*, March 9, 2007.

²¹ Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*.

²² *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

No more encouraging than the situation of the senior administrators is Morey and Piderit's analysis of student and faculty contributions to Catholic culture. The chapter on student culture provides an excellent qualitative description of what administrators hope to achieve in student intellectual and religious formation. However, the synthesis is dominated by administrators' frustrations about the vast gap between the ideal and the lived daily experience of students. The study contains a rich discussion of the difficulties of conveying a religious tradition that is both transforming and inheritable.²³

While the Morey and Piderit book focuses on Catholic campuses, several other recent studies provide a helpful context for understanding the religious and spiritual lives of today's college students. One source offers a hopeful description of how six Christian colleges seem to have maintained their religious traditions;²⁴ another provides a qualitative summary of interviews and observations of religiousness and campus life at four unnamed universities;²⁵ a third book takes a journalist's look at a dozen or more religiously affiliated colleges (e.g., Bob Jones, Brigham Young, Notre Dame, Yeshiva) with foci ranging from feminism to race and "sex, drugs and rock and roll."²⁶

National surveys of college students (not just Catholic students) have documented patterns of religiousness reminding us that to achieve many of the goals of Catholic higher education, our institutions have to swim successfully against a strong current. For example, the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) surveys find general religious involvement of students in decline during the past several decades, while the number of "spiritual seeking" students is increasing. The surveys also find lower rates of attendance at religious services, less frequent prayer, and widespread support for abortion, gay rights, and various forms of relativism.²⁷ HERI's longitudinal focus on changes in student spirituality documented similar changes, even when tracking tens of thousands of students at 236 campuses beginning with their

²³ Ibid., 155-179.

²⁴ Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

²⁵ Conrad Cherry et al., *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

²⁶ Naomi Schaeffer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2005).

²⁷ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *UCLA Study: Students Become More Spiritual in College*, (February, 2008), <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=168>.

first week on campus through their junior year. As other studies have found, the HERI study concludes that Catholic students tend to have lower scores than other denominations on many indicators of religiousness, including “religious commitment,” “religious engagement,” and “religious/social conservatism.”²⁸

One national marketing survey, sponsored by the National Catholic Colleges Admission Association, offered a more positive picture. The study contrasted the experiences of alumni at a selection of Catholic colleges to that of alumni at other types of colleges.²⁹ According to the survey results, Catholic college alumni reported many advantages compared to the flagship public universities (e.g., better sense of community, safety, better integration of faith with other aspects of life, etc.). However, many of these advantages were similar to those found at secular private colleges and other church-affiliated private colleges.

In considering these various studies, it appears that students are increasingly interested in nonreligious spirituality, which presents educators at Catholic campuses with additional challenges in a cultural environment inhospitable to many of the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism. Of particular importance, there were virtually no studies of students that offered objective comparisons between institutions on issues specific to Catholicism, such as Mass attendance, theological understanding, the practice of social justice, intention to raise one’s children in the Church, or whether one had increased or decreased their commitment to Catholicism since coming to college.

Archbishop Miller’s suggestions, regarding benchmarking and outcomes assessment, are a creative (and perhaps inevitable) extension of the need to evaluate institutional success in satisfying the Catholic dimension of mission. Morey and Piderit underscore the importance of documenting institutional success for simple reasons of survival as well: “Knowing how they are faring in terms of their religious mission is not, however, a luxury Catholic colleges and universities can sidestep if they hope to survive as distinctive institutions.”³⁰ Perhaps the best way to assess effectiveness is to go directly to the locus of all educational efforts—the student.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ National Catholic College Admission Association, *Values That Matter: A Comparative Advantage Catholic College and University Alumni Study*, (Hardwick-Day, 2007), http://www.catholiccollegesonline.org/nccaamembers/Values_Report.pdf.

³⁰ Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*, 11.

Methodology

This study may be regarded as an example of how we might “benchmark” or document differences in levels of student religiousness on Catholic campuses. This project applied social science survey methods to four “typical” Catholic colleges, and the results hold promise for wider applications. If nothing else, the approach may stimulate further dialogue on strategies to help meet the challenges ahead.

The four colleges selected for this study would probably fall in the middle of most rankings of “Catholicity.” They were not selected because they statistically represented the 220 member colleges of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. Rather, each took part in this research project for simple and pragmatic reasons. Campus ministers from four colleges met one day in 2003 to strategize about how they could be more effective at getting their job done and they eventually secured the help of a sociologist to conduct a research project. All four institutions represented mainstream colleges and universities in New England and are among the member colleges listed by the ACCU. Each is in the liberal arts tradition, of similar size (about 2000), has similar mid to higher level academic competitiveness, and is sponsored by different religious orders with small representation on the faculty and on the campus. All draw their students heavily from New England, a factor that may limit, to the extent that regional differences influence Catholicity, general application of results. None is theologically or academically extreme, and each receives students from a similar pool of applicants. Likewise, none of the colleges markets itself to the religiously inclined as being “more Catholic” or “less Catholic” than the other three, although our evidence now tells us that such a case could be made. Prospective students and parents touring each of the campuses in search of the “most Catholic” of these four colleges would have to be extraordinarily perceptive and insistently probing to be able reliably to rank the four along a continuum of Catholicity. In a culture that is frequently suspicious of organized religion,³¹ the marketing of the religious commitments of our Catholic colleges is often done with great subtlety.

One further characterization of the four colleges may be helpful. Of the four models of Catholic colleges described by Morey and Piderit, the colleges in our comparison would fall in the middle, sharing some of the

³¹ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

Table 1: Representativeness of the Sample

Characteristics of the sample of respondents	Known characteristics at the four colleges
61% female	57% female
24% seniors	22% seniors
71% Catholic	72% Catholic*
22% attend Mass weekly	16% attend Mass weekly**
14% receive Pell financial aid	14% receive Pell financial aid
2.87 average GPA (3 colleges only)	2.76 average GPA (3 colleges only)
38% in “pre-professional” majors	40% in “pre-professional” majors

*Estimates of percent Catholic were done by different authorities on each campus.

**Estimate of weekly Mass attendance done by the respective Campus Ministry offices.

characteristics of “Persuasion” and some of “Diaspora.”³² The average proportion of students who are Catholic on these campuses is 72%, close to the 65% average that the ACCU reports for their member institutions. By common agreement among the four institutions, pseudonyms will be used to mask the identities of the individual colleges.³³

The sample of students surveyed was carefully constructed to follow the rules of scientific random selection, a process diligently implemented by the Registrars on each campus. Statistical comparisons of the completed data revealed that the solid 66% student response rate comfortably mirrored the existing profiles of each of the larger student bodies, including year of graduation, percent receiving need-based aid, and the best estimates of the proportion of students in the pews at Mass weekly (see Table 1).

Short of a perfectly conducted census of 100% of a targeted population, all samples contain biases, the most common of which is the self-selection of respondents. This study contains two of note: first, a 5% higher response rate for women (the more religious of the genders); and second, the probability that the “more religious” students were the most likely to complete their questionnaires. Neither of these introduced fatal flaws, but the net effect is that the overall religiousness of the sample is more likely to be overstated than understated.

The method of data collection was a “drop off and pick up” questionnaire of 101 questions printed on a professionally formatted eight

³² Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*, 49-89.

³³ A fifth college was also surveyed and their outcomes would have stretched the continuum beyond the range of the four institutions presented in this paper. For various reasons, this college chose not to have its data included.

page instrument with seven section headings and a variety of formats, including contingency and filtering questions to facilitate flow. Student volunteers from research classes, campus ministry offices, or student government positions dropped off the questionnaires in student dormitories. They returned after a reasonable interval to pick up the completed forms, which respondents had sealed in individual envelopes to protect anonymity. Each survey was preceded by an appeal from a campus administrator (often the president) emphasizing the importance of the project and encouraging participation. In all, 1337 students completed and returned their questionnaires. While there are interesting patterns of religiousness for the non-Catholics, the results summarized in this report are *only* for the 925 students who self-identified as being Catholic with the simple question: "Do you usually think of yourself as a Catholic, a Protestant, or do you have some other religious identification?"

Most questions asked were adaptations of fairly standard items that had been used in national surveys on the religiousness of Americans over the past several decades. We systematically considered the stock of questions used by the Gallup Poll, the Pew Polls, the General Social Survey, the four national surveys of American Catholics conducted by D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and others,³⁴ and the surveys of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. There is considerable overlap among the most frequently used items, and many were adapted for application to college students. UCLA's HERI national study of "Spirituality in Higher Education" also contained items oriented to the college student that were helpful to consider,³⁵ as did other campus surveys by Notre Dame, Holy Cross, and Boston College. Finally, we considered academic sourcebooks containing well tested questions and indexes of religiousness that had demonstrated both reliability and validity.³⁶ After the data set was entered into the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), individual questions were subject to item analysis in which standardized alpha reliability coefficients were calculated to measure their reliability.³⁷

³⁴ William V. D'Antonio et al, *American Catholics Laity in a Changing Church* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989). William V. D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 2007).

³⁵ Jennifer Lindholm, "Spirituality In Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose" (Los Angeles: UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, 2004), <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu>.

³⁶ P.C. Hill, and R.W. Hood, Jr., *Measures of Religiosity* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999).

³⁷ In this process, overlapping questions were systematically introduced and removed from a core index in an effort to find the items that most reliably represented the

Using student oriented survey research to gauge the Catholicity of an institution is only one method of many possible methods, each one sure to incur legitimate criticisms from theologians and Church authorities. But this is a sociological study, not a theological one, so the focus is closer to the dorms than the heavens. It may be a healthy sign that every method for documenting such a complex phenomenon results in discomfort from various quarters. The focus on student outcomes reflects the emphasis of Pope Benedict XVI's remarks during the Papal visit to The Catholic University of America. More than in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, his 2008 address placed the centrality of the student front and center. If *Ex corde* could be characterized as having an institutional emphasis (identity, mission, general norms), Pope Benedict's emphasis was on students, especially on the question of "How do [Catholic institutions] contribute to the good of society through the Church's primary mission of evangelization?"³⁸

Our goal was not to rank the four colleges from "most Catholic" to "least Catholic," but the results will show that the students on some campuses are consistently higher—and some consistently lower—along virtually every dimension of Catholicity that we measured. Because the terms are used so frequently by parents, students, and the general public, the concepts of "more Catholic" or "less Catholic" likely have some shared meaning, even though many people feel compelled to wave two fingers of quotation marks in the air as they use the terms. In the theological sense, this study does not pretend to do much better. Volumes have been written by scholars and institutional leaders who attempt to identify the essential components of Catholic institutional identity. Much that is written is profound and inspiring, and all deserve our most thoughtful consideration as we grapple with the issues of mission that give Catholic institutions their *raison d'être*. For better or worse, this research project side-stepped such overarching issues and instead narrowed its attention to the students whose intellectual and spiritual well-being are the focus of all that we do.

concept in question. For example, the seven items related to general religiousness had a reliability coefficient of .875; the items related to allegiance to Catholicism had a coefficient of .827; the items related to Catholics seeking change had a coefficient of .8422; and those related to prayer and church attendance had a coefficient of .7701.

³⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, "Benedict XVI's Address to Catholic Educators" (presented at The Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008), <http://www.zenit.org/rssenglish-22328>.

Comparing the Four Colleges

In looking at the following tables, one can focus on either the *absolute* or the *relative* values of each statistic. In the first case, the standard of comparison is always total compliance. For example, 100% of Catholic students are expected to attend Mass weekly. While such a rate may be desired, the reality is that even at the most observant college in our sample, the proportion is only 27% (college D), a relatively high ratio compared to 17% at college A.³⁹ The absolute proportion is obviously important, but our focus is on the second type of comparison, the relative comparisons between the colleges. Our decision to focus on the relative rather than the absolute is, in itself, a sign of diminished expectations.

The analysis of data from the four colleges revealed consistent patterns of statistically significant differences in religiousness among students that divide the colleges into two groups. With rare exception, students at the same two colleges (colleges C and D) gave answers that were more consistent with Catholic beliefs and practices than did students at the other two colleges. For example, colleges C and D had higher proportions who:

- Went to Mass weekly and prayed daily;
- Said that “there is something special about being a Catholic”;
- Said that “Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than other religions do”;
- Were committed to marrying someone of their own religion and raising their children as Catholics;
- Were interested in responding to God’s call in their lives, and interested in assuming a leadership position in the Church.

Besides seeking statements of affirmative support for their Catholic identity, we also asked students several questions about their desire for changes in the Church, as well as how essential they felt a number of Church teachings were to “being a good Catholic.” As expected, students at the same two colleges (C and D) were the most likely to support the Church teachings, while students at the other two colleges were more interested in change. While a large majority of students at all colleges felt that married men should be allowed to be ordained, only at colleges A and B did a majority of students support the ordination of

³⁹ Weekly church attendance at the University of Notre Dame was estimated to be near 60%, according to a 2001 alumni research report by Trozzolo and Brandenberger, and the 2009 Pew “Religious Landscape Study” puts the national figure for Catholics at 42%, a bit higher than other national studies.

married women and gay marriage. About three-quarters of students on all four campuses believe that one could disagree with the teachings on birth control and still be a “good Catholic.” Even Church teachings on abortion are only supported near the 50% range. The “real presence” and the Resurrection are more clearly accepted as central to what the Catholic students believe, but even here, the Catholics at colleges A and B are less committed.

Selective Enrollments

Are these differences in Catholic emphasis between the four colleges due to the selective enrollments of prospective students choosing the college that matches their own predilections, or are they a product of the educational efforts and ethos of the college itself? Our data tells us that both dynamics are at work.

As parents of college students know, college selection is a complicated decision, with religious affiliation as one factor among many. The selection process is made more complicated by the fact that information about which colleges are the most or least religious is not accessible to applicants in the same way as are standardized college rankings of academic competitiveness or average class size. The general reputations for religiousness among the four colleges in our sample are, at best, blurred, even to seasoned admissions counselors. On one campus, apparently seeking to have it both ways, applicants are often told that the college is “as Catholic as you want to make it.” This may be comforting to one type of applicant, but may cause concern to another.

Our evidence tells us that there is indeed a significant tendency for students to select a college with a compatible religious orientation but it is not as dramatic as might be expected. For example, the differences in the proportion of students at each college who came from Catholic high schools (where we expected a higher density of more committed Catholics) only range from 24-38%, not as wide a range as we found in actual beliefs and practices. But another measure of selectivity is stronger: the students from the two “more Catholic” colleges (C and D) were also the most likely to tell us that “the Catholic affiliation of the college was an important factor” in their decision to enroll. A parallel question found that at these colleges, the students’ parents also rated the college’s Catholic affiliation with slightly greater importance than did their sons and daughters. This is evidence of a selectivity effect. On the other hand, we were surprised to find that a pair of questions about the strength of the

parents' religious and Catholic convictions seemed to have no bearing on the students' choices of college; parents whom the students described as "strongly Catholic" or "highly committed to religion" were equally likely to have their son or daughter enroll in any of the four colleges.

The Influence of the Colleges on Beliefs and Practices

Beyond this selectivity effect, the students tell us that the institution can, and often does, affect their level of religious commitment. What is it that takes place on a college campus that causes some students to become more or less committed to their faith?

As can be seen in Tables 2, 3 and 4, students at colleges C and D seem to be the most tightly aligned with Catholic beliefs and practices, and they are also the most likely to be increasing in religiousness as well. At colleges A and B, almost twice as many students *decrease* their commitments to both religion and the Catholic Church as those who *increase* it. Taken together, Table 5 depicts significant religious movement on the four Catholic campuses—far more than other studies have found at secular universities. Why so many changes were in the direction of decreased religious commitment—especially toward the Catholic Church—is a question worthy of further research. The list and the accompanying Table 5 document some trends in changes in religious commitment that students report since arriving at college:

- At two of the four colleges (colleges C and D) more students said that they increased their commitment to religion than decreased it; at two colleges (colleges A and B), it was the opposite;
- At none of the four colleges did more students increase their commitment to the Catholic Church rather than decrease it;
- At every college, far more students reduced their attendance at religious services than increased it; Differences between the colleges were not statistically significant;
- At every college, between one-third and one-half of the students "increased their appreciation of religion";
- At every college, Religious Studies or Theology courses were more likely to strengthen a student's religious faith rather than weaken it, although the net effects varied from campus to campus;
- At every college approximately 10-20% of the students take part in Campus Ministry activities such as retreats or choir, and one-half to two-thirds of these students report that these experiences enhance their spirituality. Differences between the colleges were not statistically significant.

Table 2: Allegiance to Catholicism

Questions	The four colleges				Chi Sq Sig.*
	A	B	C	D	
1. "During the academic year, about how often do you attend Mass?"					.004
At least once a week (Percent)	17	18	23	27	
One to three times a month	36	28	38	35	
Seldom or never	47	54	38	38	
2. "Apart from religious services, how would you describe your practice of prayer?"					.205
Daily (Percent)	25	24	33	34	
Occasionally or sometimes	51	53	52	47	
Never	24	23	16	20	
3. "There is something special about being Catholic that you don't find in other religions." (Percent who agree)	33	33	42	44	.004
4. "Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than other religions do." (Percent who agree)	13	13	26	21	.001
5. "Being Catholic is a very important part of who I am." (Percent who agree)	51	53	64	69	.000
6. "It is important to me that future members of my family grow up as Catholic." (Percent who agree)	48	52	69	65	.000
7. "If you marry, how important would it be to marry someone from your own faith tradition?" (Percent very important)	16	18	35	35	.000
8. "If you have children, how important would it be to raise them in your faith tradition?" (Percent very important)	40	43	56	67	.000
9. "How important is it to play an active role in your church." (Percent very important)	12	11	17	24	.000

*If the Chi Square levels of significance are above .05, the differences that appear between colleges may be due to chance variation. In the above table, all of the differences that we see between colleges are statistically significant. The only exception is question 2, with differences that are too close to be considered statistically significant.

Catholic Concerns for Social Justice

Another benchmark of Catholic identity is concern for social justice, an aspect of Catholic identity identified by Pope John Paul II in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*: "The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic university...."⁴⁰ Catholic colleges generally do especially well in fostering this aspect of the gospels, although a common complaint, as explained

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990), paragraph 34.

Table 3: Catholic Seeking Change and What it Means to be a “Good Catholic”

Questions	The four colleges				Chi Sq Sig.*
	A	B	C	D	
10. “Married men should be allowed to be ordained as priests.” (Percent who agree)	69	82	68	69	.010
11. “Married women should be allowed to be ordained as priests.” (Percent who agree)	54	68	51	50	.001
12. “Same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status.” (Percent who agree)	56	60	43	48	.090
Percent who agree that “one can still be a good Catholic without...”					
13. “...obeying Church teachings on birth control.”	79	87	72	77	.004
14. “...obeying Church teachings on abortion.”	49	56	40	52	.001
15. “...believing that in the Mass, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus.”	29	35	21	24	.001
16. “...believing in the Resurrection.”	22	24	19	19	.002

*If the Chi Square levels of significance are above .05, the differences that appear between colleges may be due to chance variation. The only exception is question 12, with differences that are too close to be considered statistically significant.

by Hoge et al.⁴¹ and Morey and Piderit⁴² is that the theological basis for such service is often not well articulated or understood. After their extensive interviews with Catholic administrators, Morey and Piderit concluded that “...in most instances we were unable to uncover any significant differences between how Catholic colleges and universities approach social justice issues in practice and how they are addressed at nonsectarian institutions.”⁴³

On the other hand, there is good support for the assertion that students at Catholic institutions are more committed to social justice issues. Institutional reports from UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program of freshmen indicates that first year students who attend Catholic colleges and universities are more supportive of the ideal of helping one’s neighbor than students who go to public colleges and universities.⁴⁴ The National Catholic College Admission Association

⁴¹ Dean R. Hoge et al., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 224.

⁴² Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*, 9, 56-59, 348.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA, Los Angeles, CA., Institutional Profiles, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirpoverview.php>, various years.

Table 4: General Religious Inclinations

Questions	The four colleges				Chi Sq Sig.*
	A	B	C	D	
17. Attended a Catholic high school	24%	24%	38%	35%	.001
18. “Did the fact that your college is Catholic play an important role in your decision to come here?” (Percent very important or somewhat important)	51	49	58	59	.005
19. “Did the fact that your college is Catholic play an important role in your parent’s wishes for you to come here?” (Percent very important or somewhat important)	55	49	60	59	.033
20. “How important would you say religion is in your life?” (Percent very important)	29	28	43	43	.000
21. “Religious commitment gives life a certain purpose it would not have otherwise.” (Percent who agree)	51	48	58	63	.018

*If the Chi Square levels of significance are above .05, the differences that appear between colleges may be due to chance variation. All of the above differences are statistically significant.

also reports survey data that confirmed that students at Catholic institutions have higher involvement with community service.⁴⁵ Our data suggest that the longer students remain at a Catholic college, the more committed they become to issues of social justice. But unlike most of the other religious issues, there were few consistent differences between students on each of the four campuses. It is likely that differences in rates of volunteering are a better reflection of the effectiveness of the campus volunteer programs than differences in the religious commitments of the students.

Our data found a positive association between student religiousness and their sensitivity to social justice issues. For just two examples among many, we found that 95% of the students who prayed several times a day said that “it is very important to help others in difficulty,” compared to only 68% of those who “seldom or never” prayed (see Fig.1).

⁴⁵ National Catholic College Admission Association, “Values That Matter: A Comparative Advantage Catholic College and University Alumni Study” conducted by Hardwick-Day, 2007. http://www.catholiccollegesonline.org/nccaamembers/Values_Report.pdf.

Table 5: Does College Increase Student Religiousness?

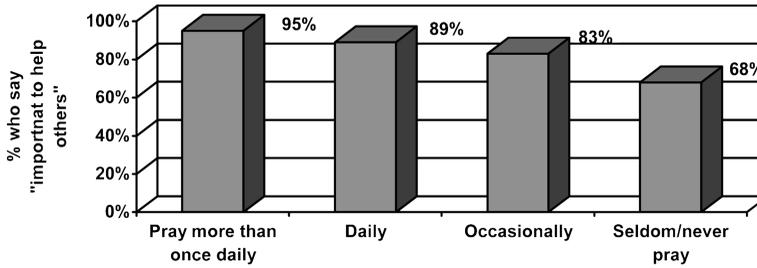
Questions	The four colleges				Chi-Sq Sig.*
	A	B	C	D	
22. "Since coming to this college, has your commitment to religion changed?"					.050
Yes, I am now more committed (Percent)	19	20	27	28	
Yes, I am now less committed	30	27	24	18	
23. "Since coming to this college, has your commitment to the Catholic Church changed?"					.015
Yes, I am now more committed	16	13	24	18	
Yes, I am now less committed	29	33	25	22	
24. "Since you've been a student here, have you gone to religious services more frequently or less frequently?"					.101
More frequently	13	9	16	8	
Less frequently	47	46	43	46	
25. "My appreciation of religion has increased since I've come to this college." (Percent who agree)	46	30	42	43	.026
26. "How often do your professors encourage classroom discussions of religious and spiritual matters in class?" (Percent always or frequently)	18	14	19	15	.361
27. "Have the Religious Studies or Theology courses strengthened, weakened or had no effect on your religious faith?"					.000
Percent strengthened	29	29	42	31	
Percent weakened	9	4	6	3	
28. "My spiritual life is being enhanced through my classroom experience and academic work."(Percent who agree)	30	18	28	23	.131

*If the Chi Square levels of significance are above .05, the differences that appear between colleges may be due to chance variation. In the above table, the differences that we see between the four colleges for questions 24, 26 and 28 are not statistically significant.

We also found that the students who go to Mass more frequently are more likely to volunteer (see Fig. 2), and high proportions of the student volunteers on each campus told us that they were motivated by their religious beliefs.

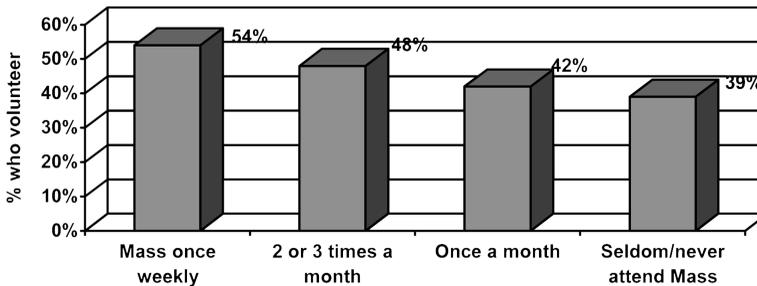
Quality of Students

Finally, our survey found that not only were the more religious students on campus the most affirming of the mission based values of



* Differences significant at the .000 level.

Fig. 1. Percent Who Say "It's very important to help others in difficulty" by Frequency of Prayer.



*Differences significant at the .003 level.

Fig. 2. Percent Who Volunteer by Frequency of Mass Attendance.

their colleges, but they also had the strongest loyalty to the college. With data that pass the most rigorous standards of statistical significance, the religious students are the most enthusiastic supporters of recruitment of other students in responding to the question: "Would you recommend your college to a high school student ...?"; they also express the strongest support for the values of the liberal arts tradition and good citizenship, asked in separate questions.⁴⁶ The institutional loyalty of the religiously engaged students continues even after graduation. This four college survey found that, far more than their less religious

⁴⁶ These findings are consistent with other studies of religiously engaged students of various persuasions. For example, Lindolm's national "Spirituality in Higher Education" project found that students with high religious involvement had higher than expected grades. The present four college survey only found weak and inconsistent evidence in support of the link between religiousness and grades.

classmates, the more religious students expressed the strongest willingness to support financially their *alma mater* after graduation.

Final Thoughts

Developing measures of college Catholicity is delicate work and the possibilities for misunderstanding and misuse are not hard to imagine. But, we hope this study helps institutional leaders consider the possibility that the benefits of such research may outweigh the risks. Comparing the responses of students at four colleges provokes many questions that deserve answers. For instance: Why do some colleges—even with imperceptible differences in reputations—somehow enroll higher proportions of students who are religious? How do some colleges, regardless of student religiousness when they enter, manage to increase a student's religious commitments (and commitment to the Catholic Church) while other colleges seem to reduce them? The changes in the students are rarely enormous, but they are significant and may offer insights into more effective ways of approaching young Catholics.

Surveys like these can help colleges to maintain and enhance the religious commitments of students, but what can we learn from them regarding these students who should be future leaders of the Catholic Church? This is not merely an academic question. The commitments of the American Catholic laity are in decline and this generation of young adults is the “least Catholic” generation in living memory. If the Church in the United States is to endure and prosper into the future, perhaps we should not be so reluctant to discuss common benchmarks of institutional Catholicity. Then, armed with that data, we could enter into a serious national dialogue about how to prepare young adults for their inevitable roles as future leaders of the Church.

