How Catholic Colleges Appeal to an Unchurched Generation

Students take part in prayer after Mass at Marquette U.
Students gather in a reconstructed medieval chapel at Marquette U. for a nighttime Mass. Even students who aren’t Catholic appreciate the open discussion of spirituality that can take place at Catholic colleges, faculty members say.

Key Moments in Roman Catholic Higher Education

1789: The first Catholic college, Georgetown, is founded by the first head of the Roman Catholic Church in America, John Carroll.

1962: The Second Vatican Council convenes in Rome, beginning a period of modernization of the Catholic Church. Vatican II indirectly lays the groundwork for change in Catholic higher education, too, by supporting intellectual exploration, encouraging dialogue with other religions, and promoting lay leadership.

1967: Two years after Vatican II ends, American Catholic-college leaders meet to discuss its implications for higher education. They release a document, known as Land O’Lakes, declaring that “institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions” for Catholic colleges, paving the way for universities to create legal and financial structures separate from the religious orders that founded them.
Karen Robinson is preparing her first-year nursing students to navigate the world just beyond the borders of Marquette University’s pristine campus. She presses them to imagine the lives of their future patients here in one of the nation’s poorest cities, people who will often be struggling with poverty and limited education. That is the Ignatian way, she tells them: Understand the whole person, discern what is important, take time to reflect, avoid superficial answers.

Her class, “Nursing and Health in the Jesuit Tradition,” required for all nursing majors, is just one example of how Catholic colleges are working to keep their mission alive in an increasingly secular society.

Continued on Following Page
Lay presidents, a minority until a decade ago, now outnumber members of the clergy at the helm of the nation’s 225 Roman Catholic colleges. Catholic students, who once dominated these campuses, now make up just half of undergraduates. The pipeline that once fed Catholic colleges is shrinking: Catholic secondary-school enrollments have dropped 42 percent since 1970. Americans, including many who are nominally Catholic, increasingly identify themselves as spiritual but not religious. And 20 percent of adults, including a third of those under 30, have no religious preference at all, according to the Pew Research Center.

Yet Catholic colleges are finding some of their most ardent supporters, faculty and students alike, among this crowd. That’s because these institutions are defining themselves in ways that focus not on traditional measures of Catholicity, such as the number of theology classes they offer or daily mass attendance. Instead, they are connecting their religious mission to topics of broad interest, like developing a meaningful philosophy of life or pursuing social justice.

Catholic colleges may be uniquely positioned, too, to appeal to the spiritual-but-not-religious crowd. They are able to explicitly encourage conversations about faith in ways that public institutions cannot. When asked whether colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development, just 18 percent of faculty members at public universities agreed, compared with 62 percent at Catholic colleges, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. That meshes well with what students want: Four out of five say they have an interest in spirituality.

At the same time, professors don’t need to hew to any particular doctrine. Unlike some evangelical Christian colleges, most Catholic institutions do not require statements of faith from their faculty members. They’ve also long been welcoming of students and professors of other religions, and, more recently, of lesbian and gay students. Pope Francis, in many ways, embodies these changes in Catholic life, urging the faithful to worry less about rules and orthodoxy and more about economic inequality and social injustice.

Catholic colleges make up a small part of the higher-education landscape, enrolling under one million students. But they often have outsized impact. A number of the nation’s most-prominent research universities are Catholic, including Notre Dame, Boston College, and Georgetown. Unlike many of their Protestant counterparts, including Harvard and Yale, they have maintained their religious character even after legally separating from their religious founders.

Marquette, which opened its doors in the heavily Catholic and working-class city of Milwaukee in 1881, embodies the evolution of Catholic higher education in the United States. Until 1970 the university and the Marquette Jesuit community were a single legal entity. Today its board of trustees is made up mostly of laypeople, and this year it hired its first lay president. About two-thirds of its freshmen and fewer than half of its faculty and staff are Catholic. Marquette is also an example of how many of these institutions, large and small, are reorienting themselves to try to meet the needs

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**What’s Working?**

Many Catholic colleges are taking steps to focus and promote their religious missions in an increasingly secular society.

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**Being Explicitly Catholic**

Like many small Catholic colleges, Walsh University, in North Canton, Ohio, was founded to educate local working-class families. Almost one-third of its students live at or below the poverty line; nearly half are the first in their family to attend college. Needless to say, it has never been a wealthy campus. When Richard Jusseaume became president in 2002, one of his first goals was to make Walsh more explicitly Catholic. His reasoning: the stronger the mission, the stronger the college. He had a prayer garden built, taught incoming faculty members about the college’s traditions, opened a campus near Rome, and focused on programs that fit Walsh’s emphasis on service, such as education, nursing, and counseling. Enrollment jumped from about 1,650 to 3,000, and not just among Catholics. A recent student-government president, Mr. Jusseaume proudly notes, was a Muslim from Afghanistan. “A few people advised me to take it easy with the Catholic stuff,” he says. “It’s almost as if it’s not cool to identify yourself too much. I’m saying identify yourself and welcome everyone.”
of the unchurched generation while still fulfilling their historic mission. Over the past 15 years or so, Marquette has added a slew of programs and positions to strengthen its Jesuit character, reaching into classrooms and offices to engage faculty, staff, and students in shaping and continuing the college’s Catholic legacy.

Over a week, in a spacious conference room just steps from the president’s office, a small group of Marquette employees meets to discuss the evolution and meaning of Jesuit education. “The conversation is led by two senior administrators from the office of mission and ministry, one of whom is a Jesuit priest,” says Ms. Noonan.

One afternoon this fall, people who work in special events, advancement, and marketing engaged in a lively discussion about the role of reflection in learning. They talked about the poverty and crime in nearby neighborhoods and the service projects they are involved in. They asked whether Marquette does enough to get students to care about the world around them. Some have worked for Marquette just a short while; others are long-time employees. All were selected by their departments for this group, which meets through the fall semester.

The Marquette Collegiates’ Program, modeled on a national program for senior administrators at Jesuit institutions, is part of the system Catholic colleges have put in place to impart their values to the next generation of leaders. Laypeople run most operations at Marquette, just as they do at most, if not all, Catholic colleges. With nearly 12,000 students and just 50 Jesuits in residence, that’s inevitable. So the university has spread its mission-focused programming to many parts of campus.

“So much of our effort has to go to giving people the vocabulary for a tradition that has lasted more than 450 years,” says Susan Mountin, who runs the Manresa project at Marquette. It began more than a decade ago to help professors incorporate Ignatian and other contemplative pedagogies into their classes, and it is named after a Spanish town where St. Ignatius spent a year praying about his vocation. Most of the faculty members Ms. Mountin encounters in her courses have no faith background at all.

Other colleges are also revamping their curricula to connect it more directly with their mission and providing classes for faculty and staff members who want to dive more deeply into the Catholic intellectual tradition. Fontbonne University, in Missouri, retooled its curriculum to put more emphasis on understanding other cultures, social justice, and diversity. Regis University, in Denver,Colorado, requires all new professors to go through a three-year training program that includes reading assignments, a retreat, and wide-ranging discussions about how their teaching and research mesh with the Jesuit intellectual traditions of the university.

“We have more work to do to explain really basic elements of our religious tradition and religious spirituality,” says Tom Reynolds, Regis’ vice president for mission. “But there’s a real openness. We’re not having people resist these conversations.”

Christopher Stockdale, an associate professor of physics, is the kind of person these programs are reaching. The tattooed 44-year-old physicist was initially hesitant to work for a religiously affiliated institution, worried that he might be asked to sign a statement of faith or see research and teaching interfered with. Instead, he found a freedom on campus, enough so that he decided to explore Ignatian pedagogy as part of his teaching career.

He was prompted in part by questions students brought to him during office hours: Could you reconcile the Bible’s teaching with the world of quantum mechanics and theoretical physics?

“When I was a grad student at Oklahoma and a student came into my office and asked me a question about religion and science, I didn’t want to say anything,” he recalls. “I was worried they were going to go home and tell their parents, and they’d call their state representative, and then we’d get a call asking us, What were we doing with taxpayer money? Here, we’re able to engage in those conversations and have a lot freer with our students.”

Marquette’s leaders directly support many of these mission-focused programs. Michael R. Lovell says there is pressure on him as Marquette’s first lay president to ensure the college’s legacy continues. “We’re not going to stray from our Catholic Jesuit identity,” says Mr. Lovell, a devout Catholic who stepped down as chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Stout to become president of Marquette.

This idea of a litmus test stung college leaders.

“At Catholic higher education now, it’s working a lot more consciously to develop its identity than it was 20 years ago,” says Thomas M. Landy, a sociologist and director of the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross. “I have no doubt that."

Many at Marquette, Mr. Lovell among them, worry about the rise of the “nones,” as those with no religion or affiliation are often called. “It’s harder for us to draw people who feel less of an affiliation with Catholicism, says he, but he adds, “even if they don’t necessarily know what it means, they can relate to the values.”

That is certainly true when it comes to Catholic social teachings, which campus—Continued on Following Page
A Generation of Change at Catholic Colleges

Catholic colleges are enrolling fewer students who identify themselves as Catholic.

Percent of first-time, full-time freshmen at Catholic baccalaureate institutions who said they were Catholic

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Catholic Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>50%</td>
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Source: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 1971-2013 CIRP Freshman Survey Trends

Close to two-thirds of Catholic colleges are now led by lay presidents.

Percent of lay presidents at Catholic colleges

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lay Presidents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>64%</td>
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Administrative positions devoted specifically to strengthening mission are becoming more common at Catholic colleges.

Number of senior mission positions at Catholic colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Senior Mission Positions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>160</td>
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Source: Michael J. James, Boston College

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questions. “In some regards that’s an exciting group to work with,” he says, “because they’re so open and seeking.”

Despite the progress Catholic colleges have made in engaging their campuses in thinking about mission, the question of what it means to be a Catholic college, and how to best represent that identity, is far from settled. The challenges are both internal and external.

For the institutions themselves, the tension between defending their institutional autonomy and remaining true to church teachings, particularly around issues of sexuality, is very real. Many Catholic colleges have debated whether to recognize gay and lesbian groups, offer birth control and sex education, or invite speakers or stage productions with views contrary to the church. Marquette is no exception. In 2010, Marquette’s former president withdrew a job offer to a lesbian sociologist who was to become the next dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Although his reasons were never made entirely clear, the suggestion was that some of her scholarly work on sexuality was at odds with the college’s Catholic identity.

The ensuing uproar among students and faculty members led the campus to ask tough questions about its attitudes toward homosexuality. Two years later, it began offering domestic-partner benefits. It has since established a Gender and Sexuality Resource Center. Meanwhile, traditionalists worry that Catholic colleges have already lost their unique character. “There used to be a distinctive Catholic higher-education culture at Marquette,” says John C. McAdams, an associate professor of political science who has taught here since 1977. “The English department tended to emphasize Catholic writers and literature, and the philosophy department stressed Aquinas and Augustine.”

Marquette says it hires for mission, adds Mr. McAdams, but when you use terms like social justice, support of the humanities, and educating the whole person, who would think that test?

Catholic colleges also continue to wrestle with their larger place in the world. Where do spiritual exercises, promotion of social justice, or Catholic pedagogy fit in a society focused on skills-based training and getting students to graduate quickly? Is it possible to play by society’s rules as well as their own? Can they attract people who do stellar teaching and research, yet also dedicate themselves to spiritual and moral development?

“That is one of the biggest challenges to Catholic universities,” says Edward J. Peck, vice president for university mission and identity at John Carroll University. “We’re simultaneously wanting our faculty to engage the distinctiveness of our mission while getting fully credentialed in the academy.”

Back inside Ms. Robinson’s classroom, students have been given their next assignment. They are to walk around the neighborhoods bordering Marquette and study what they see. Are there parks for children to play in? Does the local market sell fresh vegetables? Do the homes look safe? She knows that her students, most of whom grew up in the suburbs, will be shocked at what they find. “There’s something wrong there, and you should be upset about it,” she says of the conditions in which Milwaukee’s poorest people live.

Mr. Robinson herself isn’t Catholic, but what has kept her at Marquette—where she has earned three degrees and has worked since 2006—are the views on social justice that she shares with the church. The Ignatian tradition has always been active at Marquette, she says. “I think we’ve just defining it better.”