

# THE CHRONICLE

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## How Catholic Colleges Appeal to an Unchurched Generation



Students take part in prayer after Mass at Marquette U.

DARREN HAUCK FOR THE CHRONICLE

# THE CHRONICLE



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.

**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.

1789

1962

1963

1964

1965

1966

1967

1968

**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.

# Catholic Colleges Greet an Unchurched Generation

By BETH MCMURTRIE

MILWAUKEE

**K**AREN 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.

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InFocus

RELIGION



DARREN HAUCK FOR THE CHRONICLE

**2001:** A controversial plan for applying *Ex corde* to U.S. Catholic colleges goes into effect. It calls for the president and a majority of faculty members and trustees to be Catholic and asks that theologians who teach Catholic doctrine seek approval from their bishops. It carries no legal weight, however.

**2013:** Pope Francis becomes head of the Roman Catholic Church. He calls for increased emphasis on social justice and service.

1990

2000

2002

2004

2006

2008

2010

2012

2014

**1990:** Pope John Paul II issues *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, defining his vision of Catholic higher education as a place where the search for truth and the reflection of faith can coexist.

**2001:** Georgetown U. appoints its first lay president. It is the most prominent Catholic university to date not to be led by a member of the clergy.

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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.

**C**ATHOLIC 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 re-orienting themselves to try to meet the needs



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Sheila Connelly, a sophomore at Marquette U., helps serve a free lunch at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. Like many Catholic colleges, Marquette emphasizes learning through service.

## What's Working?

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

## 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.

Once 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.

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 Colleagues' 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 Colorado, requires all new professors to go through a three-year formation 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's 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 his research and teaching interfered with. Instead, he found a freedom on campus, enough so that he decided to explore Ignatian pedagogy a few years into 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 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 be 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 at Milwaukee to take the position. "It's our brand. It's who we are."

**T**HIS CELEBRATION of Catholic identity would have been hard to imagine just 15 years ago, when Catholic college leaders went toe-to-toe with their bishops and Pope John Paul II over the question at the very core of their existence: What makes a Catholic college Catholic?

In 1990 the pope released *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, outlining his vision for Catholic higher education. He praised universities as places where the search for truth and the reflection of faith can coexist and championed institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and intellectual exploration.

But when it came time in the late 1990s to establish guidelines, university leaders balked. Church officials wanted college's faculties and boards of trustees to be majority Catholic. The guidelines also said professors who teach Catholic theology should receive approval from their local bishop.

This idea of a litmus test stung college leaders, who had spent the past three decades working to distinguish their institutions from the church. Once owned and operated by their

founding orders—Dominican, Franciscan, Jesuit—virtually all had broken those legal ties by the early 1970s, allowing them to modernize and grow. Mission and ministry took a back seat to the pursuit of academic excellence.

Still, *Ex corde* began a national conversation among college leaders about Catholic identity.

"For a while there was a tendency to hire people who had what you might call the most respected credential. 'Oh, he graduated from Yale,' rather than people who were particularly interested in what your school set out to do," recalls the Rev. Michael J. Sheeran, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities. "What we ended up with were people who were fine in their fields but didn't develop a sense of meaning."

Today many leaders in Catholic higher education look back at that time as a turning point for Catholic colleges: If they didn't actively promote their mission, they risked losing their unique identity and rich history. "When I look 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 about that."

**A**SIDE FROM the shuffling of feet and the rustling of paper, Jame Schaefer's introductory theology class is quiet. Heads hover closely over Bibles as she takes 40 freshmen through the Gospel of Mark.

This course, required of all students, traces its roots to Marquette's earliest days, when young men received an education based on the Ratio Studiorum, or plan of studies central to Jesuit education, which included Christian doctrine, Latin, Greek, and philosophy.

Although two-thirds of Marquette freshmen are Catholic, it's anyone's guess how much religious education they've received before arriving on campus. Ms. Schaefer surveyed all of her students at the beginning of the semester and found that half of them did not have any.

Some of her students don't believe in God, she says, some hold faiths other than Catholicism, and some have only a shallow understanding of Christianity. To address this wide range of experience and views, she teaches her class as if no one walked in with any knowledge of Christian doctrine.

Many at Marquette, Mr. Lovell among them, worry about the rise of the "nones," as those with no religion are often called. "It's harder for us to draw people who feel less of an affiliation" with Catholicism, he says. 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-

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## Educating the Underserved

About 40 percent of Roman Catholics in the United States today are Hispanic, but they make up only 9 percent of students enrolled at Catholic colleges. Part of the problem is a geographic mismatch: The colleges are often in areas where Hispanics aren't. Some institutions are working with Cristo Rey, a network of 28 Catholic high schools, to widen the pipeline of underrepresented students to their campuses.

**Dominican University**, in suburban Chicago, is one such partner, even though it is already pretty diverse. Nearly 60 percent of its freshman class is Latino, says Claire Noonan, vice president for mission and ministry. Outreach is a big factor in its success. In addition to serving the local Hispanic community, Dominican has made a name for itself admitting and supporting undocumented students. "It is part of our heritage to be educating immigrant families," says Ms. Noonan.

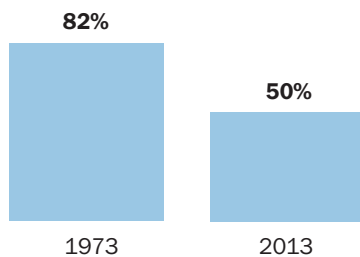
## Combining Study and Service

The Pulse Program for Service Learning at **Boston College** has been teaching students since 1969 about social responsibility through study and service work. The yearlong program fulfills students' theology and philosophy requirements, while a companion volunteer placement allows them to deepen their understanding of the world around them. In class the students, mostly sophomores, study the works of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Augustine, biblical writers, and modern-day philosophers and theologians. They also spend 10 to 12 hours a week in places like health clinics, after-school programs, and homeless shelters. The program is so popular, says Meghan T. Sweeney, its director, that it fills 14 sections and still has a wait list. Because students commit to volunteer for a year at one place, they "have a chance to develop relationships with people," she says. "That really gets into their minds and hearts."

## A Generation of Change at Catholic Colleges

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

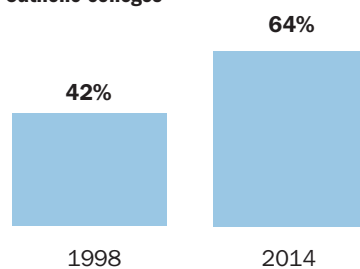
Percent of first-time, full-time freshmen at Catholic baccalaureate institutions who said they were Catholic



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

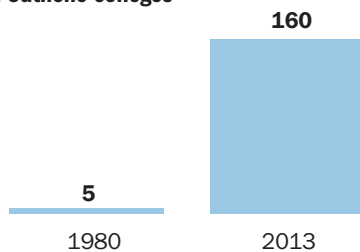


Note: These data exclude seminaries, free-standing schools of theology, and most hospital-affiliated health-profession schools.

SOURCE: ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Administrative positions devoted specifically to strengthening mission are becoming more common at Catholic colleges.

Number of senior mission positions at Catholic colleges



SOURCE: MICHAEL J. JAMES, BOSTON COLLEGE

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es have increasingly emphasized, inside the classroom and out, over the last 15 years or so. Service learning, for example, which has become a cornerstone of campus life at many Catholic colleges, is pervasive at Marquette, engaging more than 1,000 students each semester, 10 times the number it drew 20 years ago. Students in a biomedical-engineering class create devices to improve mobility for disabled patients at the Milwaukee Center for Independence. Computer programmers help nonprofit groups build databases.

“This is a big Jesuit tradition and what Marquette stresses a lot,” says A. Martina Ibáñez-Baldor, editor in chief of the student-run *Marquette Journal*. Like many undergraduates, Ms. Ibáñez-Baldor is not particularly religious. She enrolled because her father works here, but what makes her feel like she belongs is Marquette’s emphasis on engaging with other cultures and embracing diversity, including religion, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. “Marquette is a very open place,” she says.

To be sure, Marquette carries on many Catholic college traditions, including displaying crosses in classrooms and holding daily Mass. A \$15-million Jesuit Residence is being built at the center of campus to replace an aging facility for Marquette’s Jesuit community.

The spiritual heart of Marquette is St. Joan of Arc Chapel, a reconstructed 15th-century French Gothic oratory where popular, casual weeknight Masses are held, complete with upbeat singing and friendly homilies. On a recent Tuesday, Mr. Lovell sat with his wife in the corner as Father Nicky, one of the many Jesuits who live in the student residence halls, grabbed a guitar. Students crammed into the tiny space, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and sang along with the chorus: “Thank you, Lord, for making me me.”

Stephanie Russell is Marquette’s vice president for mission and ministry. Her job is to oversee the many programs on campus that help explain and carry forward the university’s Catholic identity. Yes, she says, this unchurched generation presents a creative challenge for her office. Don’t attend Mass? How about a spiritual book group instead? Longing for somewhere to belong, but not sure where? There’s a place on campus to go for that.

“We want to create a lot of portals and expose them to a tradition that values them as a person,” she says.

Sure, people on campus may pick and choose what they want to take from the church—“cafeteria Catholics,” as they are sometimes known. “But the converse,” she says, “is that you’re spoon-fed something you don’t really believe.”

For professors who want to learn more about the university’s religious mission and intellectual traditions, Marquette offers training and support programs. In addition to the Marquette Colleagues’ Program and Manresa, the university is part of Collegium, a 22-year-old program for academics at Catholic colleges interested in exploring faith and intellectual life. “Over the years it’s shifted so that most of the people who come are not religious,” says Mr. Landy, the sociologist, who runs the program. “They’ll read this stuff and say, ‘I’m not a believer, but this is really interesting.’”

On a more personal level, faculty members wrestling with questions of purpose and meaning can find support at Marquette’s Faber Center for Ignatian Spirituality, which opened in 2006 with a gift from the Jesuit community.

The center offers retreats, one-on-one counseling, and lunchtime meetings on topics like work-life balance. Michael P. Dante, its director, says that people with no particular religious affiliation are as interested as their more-devout colleagues in exploring these

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

**D**ESPITE 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 promote 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 contradictory 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 flunk 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.

Ms. 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’re just defining it better.” ■