

Higher Education Holistic Impact Report 2025

Catholic vs. Secular University Graduates
Commissioned by St. Mary's University
Conducted by YouGov

210-436-3011

One Camino Santa Maria, San Antonio, TX 78228.





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Higher education has been pulled off course by political battles, financial pressures, demographic fears, and an obsession with rankings and reputation. These forces have distracted colleges from their deeper purposes. Through my years in Catholic higher education, I have seen graduates leave not only with knowledge, but with a stronger sense of meaning, fulfillment, and responsibility to their communities. With two years of research, we can now see these outcomes are enduring advantages. Catholic education prepares students for purposeful lives, and in these times of drift, that clarity offers higher education a needed direction.”

- Jason King



Beirne Director & Chair Center for Catholic Studies,
St. Mary's University

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Purpose of the Study

Exploring the Broader Impact of a Catholic Education

Grounded in the conviction that education is about shaping whole lives, the Beirne Center for Catholic Studies, in partnership with YouGov, undertook the second iteration of this national study to better understand the transformative outcomes of higher education.

This year's research had two core objectives:

1. Forming Lives of Purpose

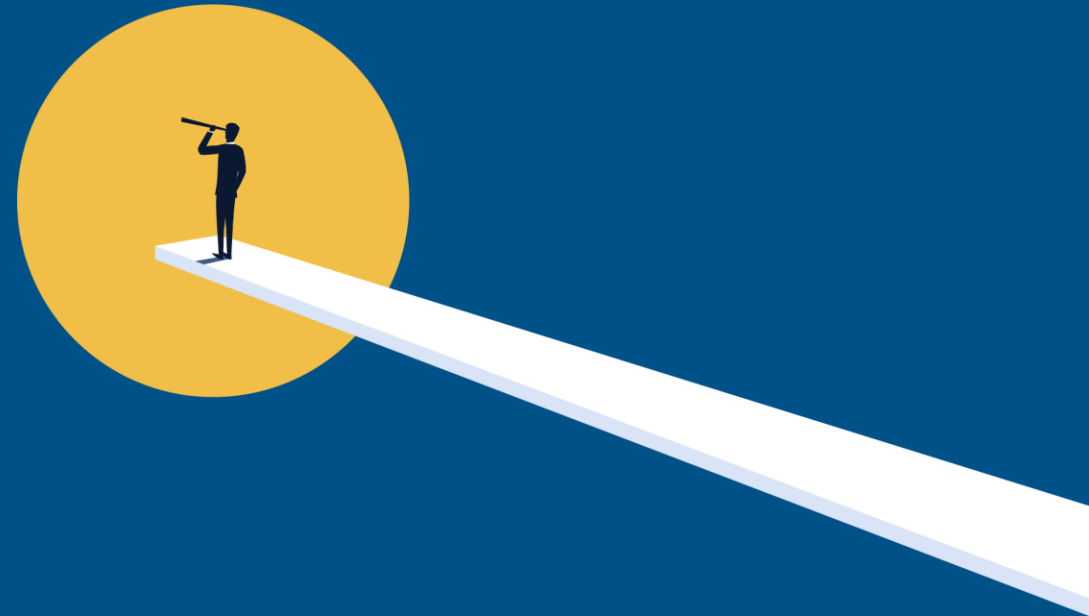
- To examine how a holistic Catholic education shapes values, strengthens community engagement, and inspires a deeper sense of meaning and direction in life

2. Direction in Higher Education

- To demonstrate how the value of higher education extends well beyond financial, political, or status concerns, shaping graduates' fulfillment, well-being, and contributions to society.

By comparing 1,000 graduates of Catholic colleges and universities with 1,000 graduates of secular institutions, this study affirms that Catholic higher education delivers distinctive, lifelong benefits that reach far beyond the paycheck.

Study Overview



YouGov

To ensure a robust and objective analysis, St. Mary's University once again partnered with YouGov, a globally recognized authority in market research. By leveraging YouGov's expertise in large-scale survey design and data analysis, this collaboration provides reliable and unbiased insights into the true impact of higher education beyond financial measures.

Methodology

YouGov interviewed adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, with the goal of screening for and surveying graduates of both Catholic and secular colleges and universities. Responses were weighted and matched using industry-standard practices to ensure balance across gender, age, race, education level, and political identity.

The 2025 survey sampled 1,000 Catholic graduates and 1,000 secular graduates, mirroring the design of the 2024 study to allow for year-over-year comparison. Statistical adjustments were applied to maintain representativeness against U.S. Census and voting data benchmarks.

Respondents

The respondent pool was carefully designed to reflect the national population of college graduates. Sampling frames included stratification by gender, age, race, and education, and were weighted against the American Community Survey (ACS), the Current Population Survey (CPS), and validated with voter and exit poll datasets.

This rigorous approach ensured that both Catholic and secular graduate samples were representative of the broader U.S. graduate population.

Respondents were asked about multiple aspects of their lives, including purpose, fulfillment, community engagement, health, morality, and professional outcomes.

Comparative and Longitudinal Insights

Because this is the second year of the study, we can now compare results with the 2024 benchmark. This shows not only where Catholic and secular graduates differ, but also how those differences are widening, narrowing, or holding steady over time.

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Key Findings Summary

Across multiple measures, Catholic graduates report advantages in life satisfaction, career fulfillment, purpose discovery, community engagement, belonging, and values formation. Financial and practical outcomes are strong as well, but the clearest differences appear in the areas that define a life well lived.

Reaffirming Meaningful Life, Community Engagement, and Ethical Decision Making from 2024

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Life is close to ideal:

7%

more Catholic grads agree their life is close to ideal (60% vs. 53%).

The conditions of my life are excellent:

12%

more likely to agree than secular grads.

If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing:

19%

more likely to agree they would change almost nothing than secular graduates.

My life has a clear sense of direction:

40%

more likely to say it's absolutely true that their life has a clear sense of direction (14% vs. 10%).

Fulfillment in life --
Community involvement:

7%

more Catholic grads are fulfilled with their community involvement (53% vs. 46%).

Volunteered in the last six months:

20%

more likely to have volunteered in the last 6 months (49% vs. 41%).

Volunteered in the last six months:

50%

more hours than secular graduates over the last six months.

Morality in decision making:

22%

more likely to say the various aspects of morality surveyed are 'extremely relevant' in decision-making.

New Key Findings

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The curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions:

52%

more Catholic grads agree that the curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions (66% vs. 14%).

The curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints:

12%

more Catholic grads agree that the curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints (81% vs. 69%).

Sense of belonging:

14%

more Catholic grads agree that they felt a strong sense of belonging at their college or university (63% vs. 49%).

My college or university helped me grow into the person I am today:

13%

more Catholic grads agree that their college or university helped them grow into the person they are today (73% vs. 60%).

I am satisfied with my mental health:

15%

more Catholic grads agree that they were satisfied with their mental health

I view my career or profession as a meaningful calling:

7%

more Catholic grads agree that they view their career or profession as a meaningful calling (72% vs. 65%).

Household incomes:

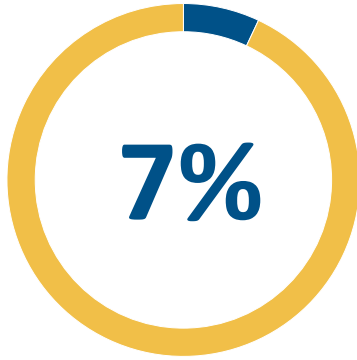
62%

vs. 52% representation in \$100k+ household income brackets.

Homeownership:

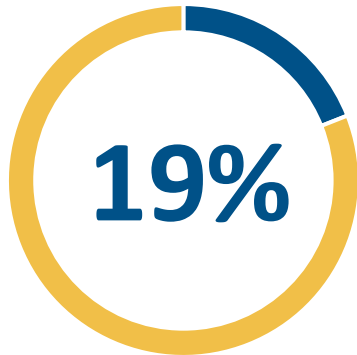
61%

vs. 57% homeownership among Catholic graduates.



Life Close to Ideal:

Catholic graduates are 7% more likely to agree their life is close to ideal.



Change Almost Nothing:

Catholic graduates are 19% more likely to agree they would change almost nothing if they could live their life over.



Interpretation:

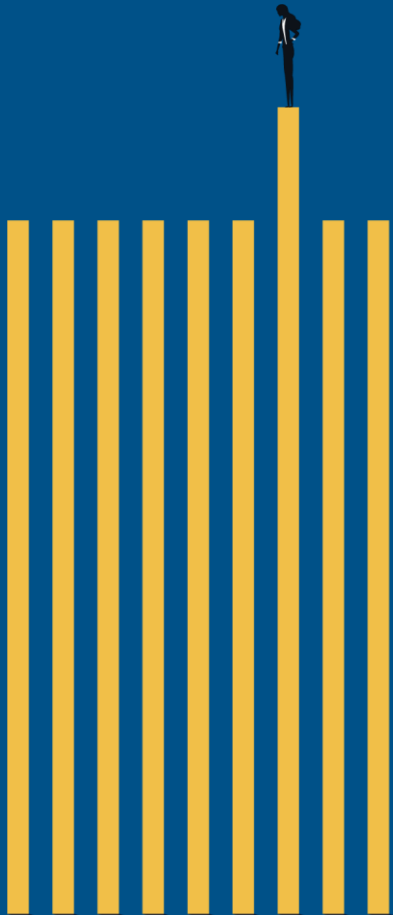
This difference has not only persisted but grown since 2024, showing that Catholic education's impact on life satisfaction is strengthening.

Finding 1:

Meaningful Life



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When graduates tell us their lives are close to their ideal, it is not simply about comfort or career success. It reflects an education that helps people understand who they are, what they value, and how they want to live. Catholic universities offer that compass to form graduates who measure their success in purpose and fulfillment, not just in paychecks. And the widening gap we see compared to last year shows this impact is becoming even clearer over time.”

- Jason King

Beirne Director & Chair Center for Catholic Studies,
St. Mary's University

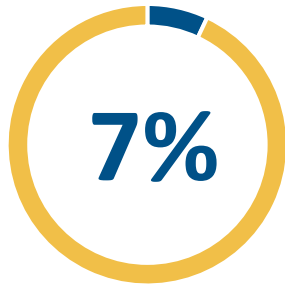


**20%****Volunteered in the last six months:**

Catholic grads are 20% more likely to have volunteered in the last 6 months

**50%****Volunteered in the last six months:**

Catholic graduates volunteer 50% more hours than secular graduates over the last six months.

**7%****Community involvement:**

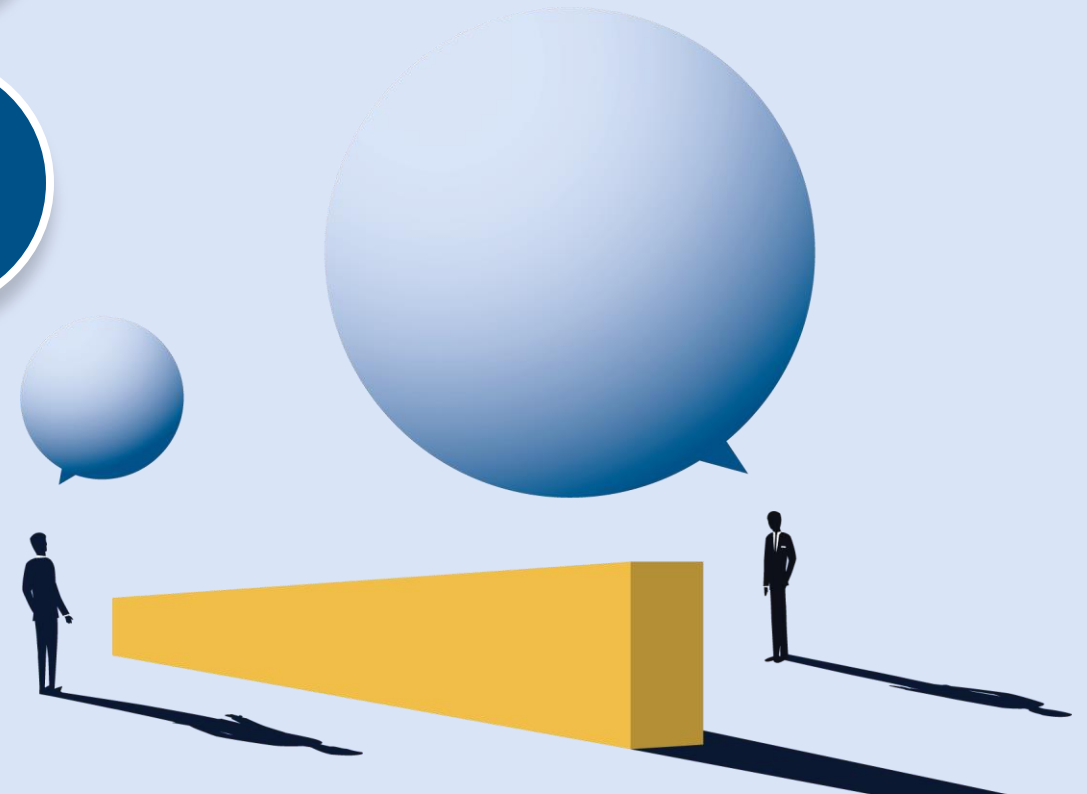
7% more Catholic grads are fulfilled with their community involvement.

**Interpretation:**

Habits of service formed in college carry forward into consistent civic engagement.

Finding 2:

Community Engagement



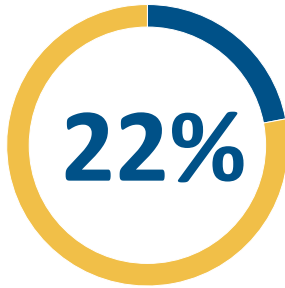


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At Catholic universities, service is not an add-on to the classroom experience. It is embedded in the very fabric of education, shaping how students see themselves and their responsibility to others. This is why Catholic graduates continue to mentor, volunteer, and lead in their communities long after graduation, because service has become part of their identity.”

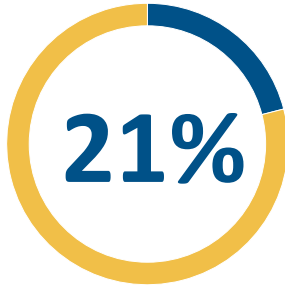
- Jason King

Beirne Director & Chair Center for Catholic Studies,
St. Mary's University



Morality in Decision-Making:

Catholic respondents are 22% more likely to say the various aspects of morality surveyed are 'extremely relevant' in decision-making.



Curriculum encouraged discussions on ethics:

21% more Catholic grads agree that the curriculum encouraged discussions on ethics.



My college or university experience shaped how I make moral and ethical decisions:

16% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university experience shaped how they make moral and ethical decisions.



Interpretation:

The widening gap compared to 2024 suggests Catholic graduates are increasingly at peace with their life paths.

Finding 3:

Ethical Decision Making



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Belonging and identity are not abstract ideals at Catholic universities. They are lived realities fostered through community, reflection, and dialogue. Graduates leave with more than a degree, they leave with a strong sense of who they are, what they stand for, and how they are connected to others. That grounding equips them to navigate a divided world with clarity and confidence. And this year's widening gap in belonging shows that Catholic graduates are valuing this formation even more strongly than before.”

- Jason King

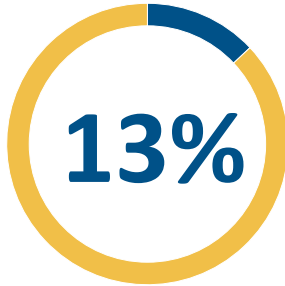
Beirne Director & Chair Center for Catholic Studies,
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Sense of community:

18% more Catholic grads agree that they felt a sense of community and shared values at their school (70% vs. 52%).



College-influenced growth:

13% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university helped them grow into the person they are today (73% vs. 60%).



Satisfied with mental health

Catholic Graduates were 15% more likely to agree that they were satisfied with their mental health.



Interpretation:

Catholic universities build communities of shared values that strengthen identity and confidence.

Finding 4:

Belonging & Identity





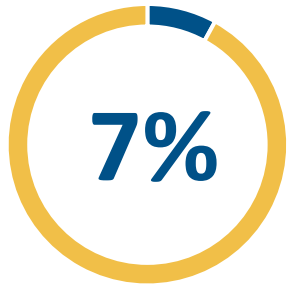
Encouraged faith-based discussions:

52% more Catholic grads agree that the curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions.



Encouraged discussions on different viewpoints:

12% more Catholic grads agree that the curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints.



Exposed to a range of viewpoints:

7% more Catholic grads agree that they were exposed to a range of viewpoints that shaped the way they think about the world.

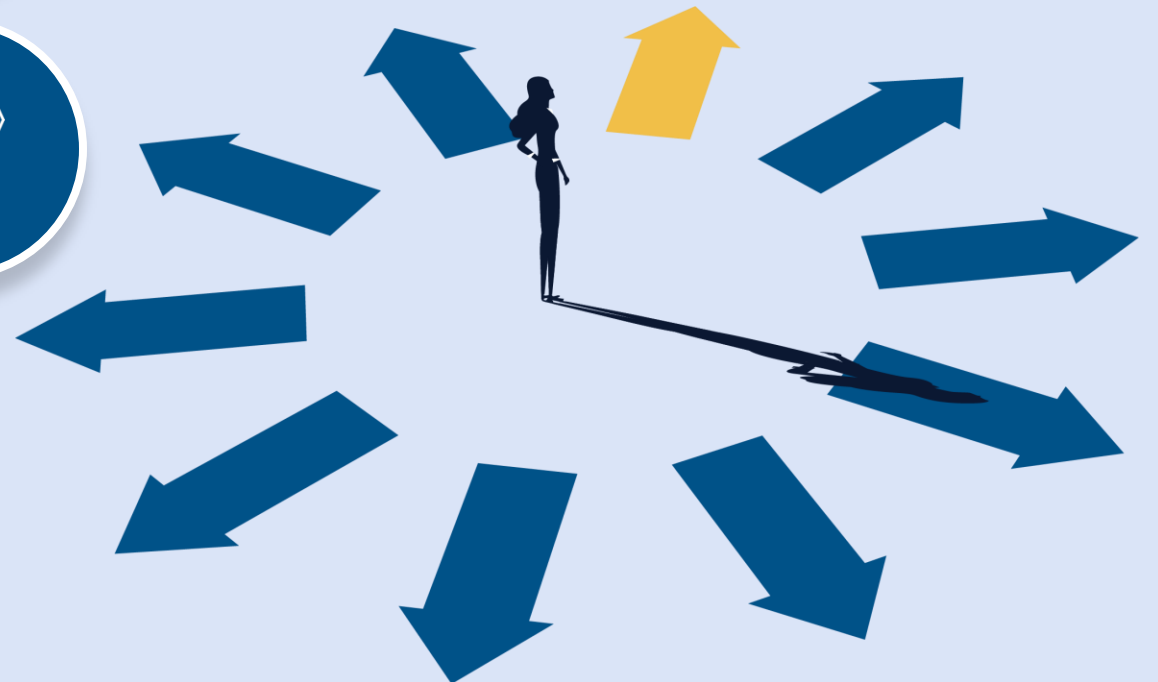


Interpretation:

Catholic education builds enduring fulfillment through faith-inspired resilience and community.

Finding 5:

Faith & Worldviews





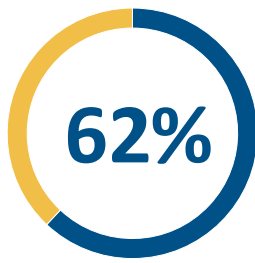
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When education weaves knowledge together with service and ethics, graduates are not merely preparing for jobs. They are discovering vocations and lives of meaning where work and purpose move in the same direction.”

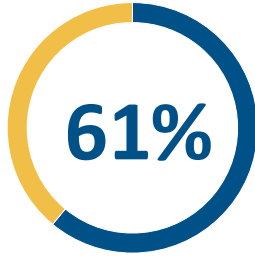


- Jason King

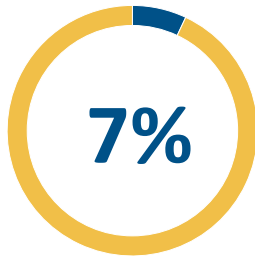
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**Household income:**

62% vs. 52% representation in \$100k+ household income brackets.

**Homeownership:**

Higher homeownership among Catholic graduates.

**Career as a meaningful calling:**

7% more Catholic grads agree that they view their career or profession as a meaningful calling.

**Understand how my work can serve others:**

16% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university helped them understand how their work can serve others.



Finding 6:

Career & Purpose

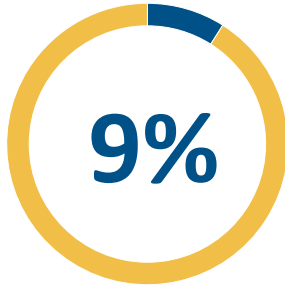
**Interpretation:**

A values-centered education supports purposeful work and sustained satisfaction in professional life.



Responsibility toward society:

15% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university helped them develop a greater sense of responsibility toward society.



Discover my purpose:

9% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university experience helped them discover their purpose.



Align professional career with personal values:

11% more Catholic grads agree that their college or university helped them align their professional career with their personal values.

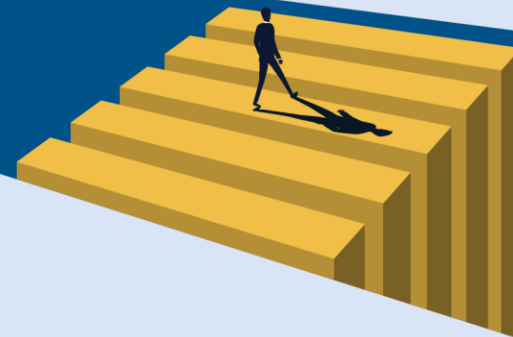


Interpretation:

A values-centered education supports purposeful work and sustained satisfaction in professional life.

Finding 7:

The Influence of College



Closing Thoughts



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This second national study affirms what we see every day at St. Mary's University: Catholic higher education forms graduates who flourish not only in their professions but also in the deeper dimensions of life. They leave with purpose, resilience, and a profound commitment to community.

With two years of research, we now see that these advantages are not only consistent but in many areas are growing. The widening gaps show that Catholic graduates are increasingly recognizing the role their education played in shaping their purpose, fulfillment, and sense of responsibility to society.

The findings call us to see higher education for what it truly is, not simply a pathway to jobs, but a formation of leaders and citizens who can bring hope, wisdom, and justice into a divided world.

As we look ahead, St. Mary's will continue to champion an education that integrates intellect, ethics, and service. I invite all institutions of higher learning to join us in this work. Together, we can prepare graduates who are not only successful in their careers but also transformative in their communities and in society at large.”

- Winston Erevelles

President,
St. Mary's University

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Universal Impact

These findings are observed across demographics, ideologies, political affiliation and location.



About St. Mary's

A Brief Introduction to St. Mary's Mission & Educational Philosophy

St. Mary's University invites and welcomes men and women of all faiths, and even of no faith, to walk together, talk together and search for truth together. We strive to educate our students to become ethical leaders for the common good, to leave campus with generous spirits and humble hearts, and to view their professional careers as vocational journeys, not just Careers.

Graduates leave St. Mary's, not with the narrow goal of personal gratification but aspiration to a life purposely lived: a life of true value.

GENERAL:

www.stmarytx.edu

210-436-3011

One Camino Santa Maria, San

Antonio, TX 78228.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES:

Jennifer Lloyd

Associate Executive Director
University Marketing &
Communications

210-431-4374

jlloyd@stmarytx.edu

PARTNERSHIPS:

Jason King

Beirne Director & Chair
Center for Catholic Studies

210-436-3856

jking25@stmarytx.edu

FURTHER INFORMATION

Jason King

Beirne Director & Chair
Center for Catholic Studies

210-436-3856

jking25@stmarytx.edu

Get in Touch



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Thank You

Thank you for your interest in the Higher Education Holistic Impact Report 2025.

To learn more about St. Mary's University and our mission to educate the whole person, visit www.stmarytx.edu

