

# How Catholic Higher Education Engages Faith and Diverse Perspectives

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Holistic Impact Report (HIR) | Research Note | HIR 2.0

*Catholic colleges and universities are distinguished by higher engagement with faith and greater exposure to diverse perspectives than their secular peers.*

## KEY FINDINGS

- Graduates of Catholic colleges are far more likely to report deep faith engagement: **65.8% vs. 14.9%** agree their curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions, and **72.9% vs. 17.4%** report their school encouraged them to explore and strengthen their faith (both  $p < .001$ ).
- The same graduates also report **greater exposure to diverse perspectives**: 81.1% vs. 68.8% report their curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints, and 75.1% vs. 69.2% agree they were exposed to a range of viewpoints that shaped how they think about the world (both  $p < .001$ ).
- Catholic campuses support this combination through **robust faith infrastructure**: opportunities to engage faith on campus (85.9% vs. 57.0%) and faith-based groups, activities, and spaces (83.6% vs. 60.9%, both  $p < .001$ ).
- Qualitative comments describe a campus culture that is **both distinctively Catholic and genuinely open to other traditions**.

## OVERVIEW

It is no surprise that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report higher engagement with faith than graduates of secular institutions. What is less expected is that the same graduates also report greater exposure to diverse perspectives than their secular peers. The 2025 Holistic Impact Report (HIR) suggests this is not a coincidence. Catholic higher education's engagement with faith and its engagement with diverse perspectives are part of the same Catholic identity.

The HIR surveyed 2,000 college graduates, 1,000 from Catholic institutions and 1,000 from secular institutions, on a range of outcomes including engagement with faith, exposure to diverse viewpoints, and the campus structures that support both. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities were also invited to describe in their own words how their

institution supported students in exploring and engaging with different faiths. This research note examines what those data reveal about the character of Catholic higher education — and why the combination of rootedness and openness it produces is not incidental but characteristic.

## FAITH ENGAGEMENT AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The headline finding of the HIR on this topic is straightforward: graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are substantially more likely than their secular peers to report both engagement with faith and diverse perspectives. The two do not trade off.

% Somewhat to Strongly Agreeing	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
<b>Curriculum and Faith</b>			
The curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions*	65.8%	14.9%	<b>+50.8 pp</b>
My school encouraged students to explore and strengthen their faith*	72.9%	17.4%	<b>+55.5 pp</b>
The curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints*	81.1%	68.8%	<b>+12.3 pp</b>
<b>Campus Faith Life</b>			
There were opportunities for students to engage with their faith on campus*	85.9%	57.0%	<b>+28.9 pp</b>
There were faith-based groups, activities, and/or spaces on my campus*	83.6%	60.9%	<b>+22.7 pp</b>
* $p < .001$   Percentages reflect combined Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree responses			

On faith engagement, the differences are large. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more than 50 percentage points more likely to report that their curriculum encouraged faith-based discussions (65.8% vs. 14.9%,  $p < .001$ ), and more than 55 percentage points more likely to report that their school encouraged them to explore and strengthen their faith (72.9% vs. 17.4%,  $p < .001$ ).

The diversity finding is equally notable. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are 12.3 percentage points more likely to report that their curriculum encouraged discussions on different viewpoints (81.1% vs. 68.8%,  $p < .001$ ). An education that takes faith seriously, these data show, also takes diverse ideas seriously.

Exposed to a Range of Viewpoints That Shaped How I Think About the World	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
Strongly agree*	19.7%	16.7%	<b>+2.9 pp</b>
Agree	34.8%	26.4%	<b>+8.3 pp</b>
Somewhat agree	20.6%	26.0%	<b>-5.4 pp</b>
Neither agree nor disagree	11.5%	13.8%	<b>-2.3 pp</b>
Somewhat disagree	5.7%	7.2%	<b>-1.5 pp</b>
Disagree	4.8%	4.5%	<b>+0.3 pp</b>
Strongly disagree	3.0%	5.3%	<b>-2.3 pp</b>

\*  $p < .001$  | Unweighted N = 1,000 per group

The viewpoints data extend this picture beyond the curriculum. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more likely than their secular peers to agree that they were exposed to a range of viewpoints that shaped the way they think about the world (75.1% vs. 69.2%,  $p < .001$ ), more likely to strongly agree (19.7% vs. 16.7%), and less likely to strongly disagree (3.0% vs. 5.3%). On a measure with no formal connection to religious identity, graduates of Catholic institutions still report broader intellectual exposure than their secular peers.

## THE STRUCTURES BEHIND THE FINDINGS

Catholic campuses build the institutional conditions for engagement with faith and a range of perspectives. On campus structures, graduates of Catholic institutions report substantially higher rates of agreement that there were opportunities to engage with their faith on campus (85.9% vs. 57.0%,  $p < .001$ ) and that faith-based groups, activities, and spaces were present (83.6% vs. 60.9%,  $p < .001$ ).

The qualitative data provides details to this infrastructure. Thematic analysis of 686 substantive responses from graduates of Catholic colleges and universities identified five prominent campus features, each present in an estimated 20–45% of responses:

- campus ministry and student groups,
- theology and religion in the curriculum,
- interfaith events and dialogue,
- a welcoming and inclusive environment, and
- chapel, Mass, and worship services.

What is striking about this list is the presence of multiple themes in graduate's comments. They describe a robust Catholic liturgical and sacramental life and interfaith programming, required theology courses and courses on world religions, an explicit commitment to faith on campus and an open and welcoming culture.

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*My school had faith-based groups, required theology classes that ran the spectrum of religion and subjects, there was a church on campus, a seminary for students, and many religious resources.*

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*Everyone was required to take one religion, one philosophy, and one ethics course. The religion course was not about Catholicism but ranged on a variety of topics that covered multiple religions.*

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*My school made it easy for students to explore different faiths. There were regular events led by different religious groups, and the campus chapel was open to everyone.*

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*Faculty and campus leaders were approachable which fostered an environment where faith discussions were welcomed both inside and outside the classroom.*

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## THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The HIR data describe Catholic higher education's capacity to hold strong Catholic commitments and genuine engagement with diverse perspectives. This environment should not be too surprising as it is rooted in the tradition. In the Second Vatican Council's 1965 *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*. The document articulates a Catholic posture toward other religions that is neither relativist nor exclusionary: the Church "rejects nothing that is true and holy" in other traditions, regards them with sincere reverence, and calls Catholics to dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions.

What the HIR data show is that Catholic campuses embody this tradition. Graduates describe institutions that are recognizably Catholic, with theology requirements, campus ministry, Mass, and an explicit faith mission, and that engage other traditions with respect and intellectual seriousness.

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Catholic higher education is not a tradeoff. The HIR data show that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report higher engagement with faith and greater encouragement of diverse perspectives than their secular peers. This is a consequence of Catholic identity itself. A rigorous Catholic education is committed to its tradition, to engaging what is true and holy wherever it is found, to encouraging serious discussion of diverse perspectives, and to building the institutional practices that make the commitment and engagement real.

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## STUDY INFORMATION

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This research note draws on data from the 2025 Holistic Impact Report (HIR), conducted by the Center for Catholic Studies at St. Mary's University in partnership with YouGov. The study surveyed 2,000 college graduates, 1,000 alumni of Catholic colleges and universities and 1,000 alumni of secular institutions. The sample was weighted to reflect the national demographics of U.S. college graduates using propensity score matching and post-stratification on gender, age, race, education, religion, and presidential vote choice. Statistical significance was assessed at conventional thresholds ( $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Qualitative responses were drawn from an open-ended question asked of graduates of Catholic colleges and universities regarding how their institution supported engagement with different faiths; 686 substantive responses were analyzed using keyword-pattern matching with manual validation ( $n=75$ ).

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