

How Catholic Higher Education Fosters Service and Volunteering

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

Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities volunteer at higher rates than their secular peers, a pattern consistent across two years of data.

KEY FINDINGS

- Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are **consistently more likely to volunteer** than their secular peers: 48.6% vs. 40.8% in 2025 and 52.3% vs. 42.9% in 2024 (both $p < .001$).
- In 2025, Catholic graduates who volunteer average **10.2 more hours** of service than secular volunteers (51.9 vs. 41.6 hrs). In 2024, volunteering rates were also higher among Catholic graduates, though hours were comparable, suggesting that what Catholic higher education distinctively fosters is **more people choosing to serve**.
- Catholic graduates are more likely to engage in **direct, person-centered service**: mentoring, aiding seniors, food bank volunteering, and serving on community boards all show the largest gaps over secular peers.
- Catholic graduates are more likely to agree that their institution influenced their **sense of community responsibility**.

OVERVIEW

The 2025 Holistic Impact Report (HIR) finds that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities volunteer at substantially higher rates than their secular peers, a pattern that holds across two years of data, across a range of volunteer activities, and across measures of civic engagement. This research note examines what the data show and what they suggest about the lasting contribution of Catholic higher education to graduates' lives in community.

The HIR surveyed 2,000 college graduates in both 2024 and 2025, 1,000 from Catholic institutions and 1,000 from secular institutions, on a range of outcomes including volunteer participation, hours of service, types of activities, civic engagement, and reflections on the role of their education in shaping their community involvement. The data are consistent: graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more likely to give their time, more likely

to engage in hands-on service, and more likely to credit their institution with cultivating that commitment.

VOLUNTEERING RATES

Across both years of the HIR, graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are significantly more likely to have done volunteer work in the preceding six months than their secular peers.

Volunteered in Last 6 Months	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
2025*	48.6%	40.8%	+7.8 pp
2024*	52.3%	42.9%	+9.4 pp

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

In 2025, 48.6% of Catholic graduates reported volunteering in the past six months, compared to 40.8% of secular graduates, a gap of 7.8 percentage points ($p < .001$). In 2024, the gap was 9.4 percentage points (52.3% vs. 42.9%, $p < .001$). The consistency across two independent survey years strengthens confidence in the finding. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are not just more likely to volunteer. They are reliably more likely to do so.

HOURS OF SERVICE

Among graduates who volunteer, the HIR also asks how many hours of volunteer work they engaged in over the past six months.

Avg. Hours of Volunteer Work (Past 6 Months)	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
2025	51.9 hrs	41.6 hrs	+10.2 hrs
2024	43.3 hrs	42.8 hrs	+0.5 hrs

Among graduates who reported volunteering | Unweighted N: 2025: Catholic 482, Secular 410; 2024: Catholic 531, Secular 429

In 2025, Catholic graduates who volunteer average 51.9 hours compared to 41.6 hours among secular volunteers, a gap of more than 10 hours. In 2024, both groups averaged roughly comparable hours (43.3 vs. 42.8). This finding together with the volunteering rates tell a single story. Catholic higher education produces more volunteers, and more volunteering.

This finding aligns with earlier research on service and Catholic higher education. In a study of students across twenty-six Catholic campuses, researchers found that students do not perceive volunteering to be intrinsically Catholic in character. They do not see their

service as distinctively different in kind from what others do. What students associate with a Catholic institutional identity is rather the expectation that one should volunteer more (Herr and King, 2019). The HIR data suggest that this expectation carries forward. The graduates of those institutions are, in fact, more likely to continue volunteering after graduation.

WHAT GRADUATES DO: VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Beyond rates and hours, the HIR asks graduates which specific volunteer activities they have engaged in over the past six months. Across both years, Catholic graduates participate at higher rates across a broad range of activities.

Volunteer Activities	Catholic	Secular	Diff.	Catholic	Secular	Diff.
	2025			2024		
Donation of money or goods	43.1%	38.9%	+4.2	43.7%	39.8%	+3.9
Served as mentor or counselor*	13.1%	7.5%	+5.6	11.6%	9.9%	+1.7
Aiding seniors*	13.8%	8.9%	+4.8	13.6%	12.4%	+1.2
Volunteering at food bank*	11.9%	7.1%	+4.8	9.8%	6.8%	+3.0
Serving on community board*	10.0%	5.7%	+4.3	10.6%	5.2%	+5.4
Fundraising walk/run***	9.9%	6.9%	+3.0	11.5%	7.0%	+4.5
Tutored youth or community**	7.8%	4.6%	+3.2	5.8%	5.6%	+0.2
None of these*	28.8%	35.9%	-7.1	22.1%	30.3%	-8.2

* $p < .001$ | ** $p < .01$ | * $p < .05$ | $N = 1,000$ per group per year | Difference in percentage points

The table shows a consistent directional advantage for Catholic graduates across both years. The most pronounced and stable gaps appear in activities oriented directly toward people: serving on a community board (+4.3 pp in 2025, +5.4 pp in 2024), mentoring (+5.6 pp in 2025), aiding seniors (+4.8 pp in 2025), and volunteering at a food bank (+4.8 pp in 2025, +3.0 pp in 2024). Donation of money or goods is the most common activity for both groups and shows a consistent gap across both years. The “none of these” row tells the same story in reverse: Catholic graduates are substantially less likely to report no volunteer activity, and that gap held in both 2024 and 2025.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The HIR also measures civic engagement. The differences here are smaller than in volunteer activities, but the overall direction is the same.

Civic Engagement Activities	Catholic	Secular	Diff.	Catholic	Secular	Diff.
	2025			2024		
Donated to place of worship*	27.3%	19.7%	+7.6	29.7%	23.6%	+6.1
Attended school board/council mtg*	8.5%	4.6%	+3.9	8.8%	5.4%	+3.4
Bought/avoided product on values	38.5%	34.8%	+3.8	33.5%	32.4%	+1.1
Wrote/posted political messages	23.6%	20.4%	+3.3	15.5%	17.8%	-2.3
Voted in a local election	39.4%	37.5%	+1.9	43.4%	39.2%	+4.1
None of these	16.9%	18.7%	-1.8	17.8%	23.2%	-5.4

* $p < .001$ | $N = 1,000$ per group per year | Past 6 months | Difference in percentage points

The most consistent gaps across both years are in donating to a place of worship and attending school board or local council meetings. The “none of these” row again reinforces the broader picture. Catholic graduates are less likely to report no civic engagement, and that gap widened between 2024 and 2025. The civic engagement data point in the same direction as the volunteering findings. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more broadly oriented toward participation in civic society.

HOW GRADUATES REFLECT ON THEIR EDUCATION

The 2024 HIR established that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities volunteer at higher rates than their secular peers. In developing the 2025 study, that finding prompted a direct question: do graduates attribute that orientation to their institution? The answer is yes, and by substantial margins.

% Somewhat to Strongly Agreeing	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
My college or university influenced how I contribute to my community*	59.0%	45.3%	+13.7 pp
My college or university helped me develop a greater sense of responsibility toward society*	68.6%	53.5%	+15.1 pp

* $p < .001$ | Unweighted $N = 1,000$ per group | Percentages reflect combined Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree responses

In 2025, 59.0% of Catholic graduates agreed that their college or university influenced how they contribute to their community, compared to 45.3% of secular graduates. And 68.6% agreed their institution helped develop their sense of responsibility toward society, compared to 53.5%, a gap of more than 15 percentage points. Both differences are significant at $p < .001$. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are not only more likely to volunteer but also more likely to credit their education with cultivating that commitment.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The HIR data tell a consistent story across two years. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more likely to volunteer, more likely to engage in a range of service activities, and more likely to credit their education with cultivating that orientation.

Catholic higher education has long held that care for the neighbor is not optional. In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II states that “an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family” (no. 13) is an essential characteristic of every Catholic university. What the HIR suggests is that this institutional commitment produces graduates who carry that orientation into their lives after graduation. They volunteer more often. They serve in direct and personal ways. And they recognize their institutions as having shaped that commitment.

STUDY INFORMATION

This research note draws on data from the 2025 and 2024 Holistic Impact Reports (HIR), conducted by the Center for Catholic Studies at St. Mary’s University in partnership with YouGov. Each study surveyed 2,000 college graduates, 1,000 alumni of Catholic colleges and universities and 1,000 alumni of secular institutions. The samples were 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 ($p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$).

Herr, Andrew, and Jason King. 2019. “Does Service and Volunteering Affect Catholic Identity?” Praxis: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Faith and Justice 1(2): 104–122.

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