

How Catholic Higher Education Shapes Graduates' Understanding of Work

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Catholic higher education achieves strong economic outcomes for graduates and situates them within a broader understanding of work as calling, service, and contribution to human community.

KEY FINDINGS

- Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities achieve strong economic outcomes, with **7.3 percentage points more** employed full-time and **9 percentage points more** reporting household incomes at or above \$100,000.
- Across a twenty-three-item Applied Intellectual Competencies battery, graduates of Catholic higher education report stronger self-assessed capabilities in communication, motivation, adaptability, collaboration, and intellectual dispositions, skills that matter across all work and life contexts.
- On five Vocational Identity items measuring calling, service, values, purpose, and impact, graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report **5.8 to 8.4 percentage point advantages** over secular graduates, all significant at $p < .001$.
- Together, these findings suggest that Catholic higher education situates work within a vision of integral human flourishing, developing graduates understand their work as embedded in lives of meaning, community, and service.

OVERVIEW

The 2025 Holistic Impact Report documents that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities achieve strong economic outcomes. They find full-time employment, reach higher income levels, and build financial stability at rates comparable to or exceeding those of secular graduates. What distinguishes Catholic higher education is the context for them. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities understand their work as connected to calling, service, and purpose, an understanding that reflects a broader formation in meaning and community that Catholic higher education consistently produces.

The HIR consistently finds that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report stronger outcomes across a range of domains: more meaningful lives, more robust

community engagement, and stronger ethical commitments. This research note examines how those broader outcomes connect to Catholic higher education’s approach to work. The data suggest that does not treat work narrowly, as job preparation or credential attainment, but as part of a fuller vision of human life.

ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report strong results across standard financial measures.

Full-time employment rates show a Catholic advantage of 7.3 percentage points (58.8% versus 51.6%, $p < .01$). Household income follows a similar pattern: 52.5% of graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report household incomes at or above \$100,000, compared to 43.5% of secular graduates, a difference of 9 percentage points significant at $p < .001$. Research examining long-term earnings has also found that graduates of Catholic colleges and universities perform comparably with, and better over time than, graduates of other institutions (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2025).

APPLIED INTELLECTUAL COMPETENCIES

The 2025 HIR introduced a twenty-three-item Applied Intellectual Competencies (AIC) battery measuring graduates’ self-reported capabilities across domains including communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, collaboration, intellectual humility, and self-management. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale. Results below reflect the percentage selecting “Strongly Agree.” These items were developed for the HIR drawing on frameworks of skills sought by employers (Irani et al., 2007). They measure capabilities that matter across most work contexts, preparing someone not just for a specific job but for the full range of professional demands they will encounter.

Nine items reach statistical significance at $p < .001$. These cluster around three capabilities: communication, motivation, and adaptability.

Applied Intellectual Competency	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
Communication (C)			
I am an effective communicator (C)	27.1%	17.8%	+9.3 pp
I can clearly communicate complex information (C)	27.5%	18.4%	+9.1 pp
I present issues in a clear and precise manner (C)	23.2%	16.9%	+6.3 pp
Motivation (M)			
I can motivate others to work toward a goal (M)	20.6%	12.2%	+8.4 pp

I developed the ability to inspire or influence others (M)	16.4%	10.1%	+6.3 pp
I gained the confidence to create and share a vision for change (M)	15.6%	10.2%	+5.4 pp
I can persuade others to support my point of view (M)	12.8%	8.2%	+4.6 pp
Adaptability (A)			
I can effectively prioritize competing tasks (A)	28.8%	21.6%	+7.2 pp
I am skilled in conflict resolution (A)	17.8%	11.3%	+6.5 pp
<i>Values represent the percentage of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree." All differences significant at $p < .001$</i>			

Communication advantages are the largest, ranging from 6.3 to 9.3 percentage points. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more likely to describe themselves as effective communicators, more capable of conveying complex information, and more precise in how they present issues. Motivation advantages range from 4.6 to 8.4 percentage points, with graduates of Catholic colleges reporting stronger capacity to inspire others, share a vision, and move people toward shared goals. Adaptability advantages of 6.5 to 7.2 percentage points reflect stronger self-reported skill in prioritizing competing demands and navigating conflict.

Five additional items reach significance at $p < .01$, representing collaboration and purposeful effort.

Applied Intellectual Competency	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
Collaboration			
I consider myself a team player	28.3%	21.9%	+6.4 pp
I work well with others from different backgrounds	32.7%	27.0%	+5.7 pp
Purposeful Effort			
I am willing to go out of my way to find the right answers to a problem	31.5%	25.5%	+6.0 pp
I approach problems creatively	23.8%	17.9%	+5.9 pp
I can set goals and achieve them	27.2%	21.5%	+5.7 pp
<i>Values represent the percentage of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree." All differences significant at $p < .01$</i>			

Four items reach significance at $p < .05$, each measuring intellectual dispositions.

Applied Intellectual Competency	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
I search for the truth even when it makes me uncomfortable	29.2%	24.7%	+4.5 pp
I am willing to learn alternative ways of doing things	28.7%	24.2%	+4.5 pp
I am comfortable asking questions	36.5%	32.2%	+4.3 pp
I am an effective problem-solver	26.5%	22.4%	+4.1 pp

Values represent the percentage of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree." All differences significant at $p < .05$

Across the AIC battery, graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report stronger capabilities in those measures that apply to almost all jobs. The pattern is consistent, with the largest advantages clustering around interpersonal and relational capabilities, important skills when work is understood as engaging and serving others. These competencies indicate that preparation for work is understood broadly, as part of human living, a perspective reinforced by the Vocational Identity measurer.

VOCATIONAL IDENTITY

The 2025 HIR also introduced a five-item Vocational Identity scale measuring how graduates understand the relationship between their work and larger frameworks of meaning. All five items reach statistical significance at $p < .001$.

Vocational Identity Item	Catholic Grads	Secular Grads	Difference
My college helped me understand how my work can serve others	17.7%	9.3%	+8.4 pp
I view my career or profession as a meaningful calling	26.2%	19.4%	+6.8 pp
I see a clear connection between my education and the impact I hope to make in the world	18.9%	12.2%	+6.7 pp
My life's work is aligned with my core values	22.0%	16.0%	+6.0 pp
My college experience helped me discover my purpose	13.5%	7.7%	+5.8 pp

Values represent the percentage of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree." All differences significant at $p < .001$

The items measure whether graduates understand their work as connected to service, calling, impact, values, and purpose. Across all five, graduates of Catholic colleges and universities report advantages of 5.8 to 8.4 percentage points. The largest gap appears on the item most directly attributable to institutional formation: 17.7% of graduates of Catholic colleges strongly agree that their college helped them understand how their work can serve others, compared to 9.3% of secular graduates, a difference of 8.4 percentage points.

The pattern across all five items is consistent. Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities are more likely to view their career as a meaningful calling, to see a connection between their education and the impact they hope to make, and to report alignment between their work and their core values. These outcomes reflect a formation that treats work as embedded in Catholic higher education's broader outcomes of meaningful and purposeful lives and community engagement.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The Applied Intellectual Competencies and Vocational Identity findings, taken together with the economic outcomes, point toward “integral human flourishing.” I derive this term from Pope Paul VI’s concept of “integral human development,” introduced in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. Paul VI argued that authentic progress cannot be measured by economic growth alone and must attend to the whole person, including spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions alongside material ones. Substituting “flourishing” for “development” reflects a shift in context, from nation-states to undergraduate education, while preserving the core insight that economic goods are real and important but insufficient as a measure of a fully human life. Integral human flourishing captures the vision that orients Catholic higher education as it emerges in the HIR findings, a vision that situates economic success within broader lives of meaning, community, and ethical commitment.

STUDY INFORMATION

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 ($p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$). The Applied Intellectual Competencies battery drew on employer-identified skill frameworks, primarily through the University of Florida’s Engagement, Maturity, and Innovativeness framework (Irani, T., Rudd, R., Gallo, M., Rickes, J., Friedel, C., & Rhoades, E. (2007). Critical thinking instrumentation manual. http://step.ufl.edu/resources/critical_thinking/ctmanual.pdf). Long-term earnings comparisons draw on Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2025).

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