News



The Santa Clara University Chamber Singers, directed by Scot Hanna-Weir, perform in their May 14 virtual concert, “Embrace the Lag.” (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)



by Lucy Grindon

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lgrindon@ncronline.org

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Ryleigh Myers has long been interested in church mystics, and as a student at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York, she was able to learn more about them as part of her religious studies and theology major.

But now Myers — and the only two other students pursuing majors in her program — plan to transfer to other schools, after the Jesuit institution cut the major in part because of financial challenges related to the coronavirus pandemic.
(Though the students were given the option to complete their religious studies majors at Canisius, none of the three chose to do so.)*

Myers, who will attend Holy Apostles College and Seminary online this fall, recalled thinking, "I should probably transfer to an institution where my Catholic faith is upheld, and permeates the institution's approach to higher education, and I should also attend a university where funding is given out freely so students can explore their every need when it comes to thesis writing or special interests."

"Canisius couldn't offer that to me anymore," she said.

Canisius has been struggling financially for years, but the added burden of the coronavirus pandemic has forced administrators to reduce the school's operating budget by $12.3 million, said President John Hurley. According to WKBW Buffalo and other reports, the college has eliminated more than 90 jobs and nine majors in the process, including religious studies.

The $2.5 million in cuts to academic programs and faculty positions, including the elimination of some tenured professors, which Hurley laid out in a letter to alumni, sparked protests, questions about the college's commitment to the liberal arts and a faculty senate vote of "no confidence" in President John Hurley and the board of trustees, student newspaper The Griffin reported July 23.

For Hurley, prioritizing student demand when making cuts does not have to mean compromising on Jesuit liberal arts education. "We are going to continue to offer a core curriculum in which we're going to teach religious studies and theology, philosophy, history, English. We're not abandoning that," Hurley said.



The quad at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York (Wikimedia Commons/Andre Carrotflower)

But Nancy Rourke, who teaches Catholic ethics at Canisius, worries that the college may undermine its mission by focusing on career-oriented programs. "That's not commensurate with the Jesuit identity because it isn't about — or good at — trying to form the whole person," she said. "And it's not really good for a Catholic college either, because there are a million other schools that do that, so what makes it so special to be us if we're doing the same thing?"

Canisius is not alone in its financial struggles. U.S. colleges and universities will face unprecedented economic strain and dramatically altered campus life this semester as they impose health and safety measures.

Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, told NCR that most Catholic colleges are planning to resume with " hybrid" instruction so that faculty and students can work remotely if they choose. Under most hybrid plans, some classes will be taught in person for small groups of students, while others of their classmates watch online, either live or asynchronously. Other classes will be taught exclusively online.

Many colleges besides Canisius will have to cut costs this year, Holtschneider said. Across the country, including at universities that are going fully online (Harvard is

one example), many students are being asked to pay the same tuition they did last year for a very different educational experience, as The New York Times reported July 6. (Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, which will cover 100% of its students tuition costs this fall, is a notable exception.)

According to Jesuit Fr. Kevin O'Brien, president of Santa Clara University in California, the university's biggest financial challenges have come from decreased enrollment and the expense of partially refunding last semester's room and board. O'Brien noted that Santa Clara expects new student enrollment this fall to be about 5% below target. About three quarters of U.S. colleges expect to fall short of enrollment goals this semester, he said.



Jesuit Fr. Kevin O’Brien, president of Santa Clara University, celebrates a livestreamed Feast of St. Ignatius Mass in the Santa Clara Mission Church on July 31. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)

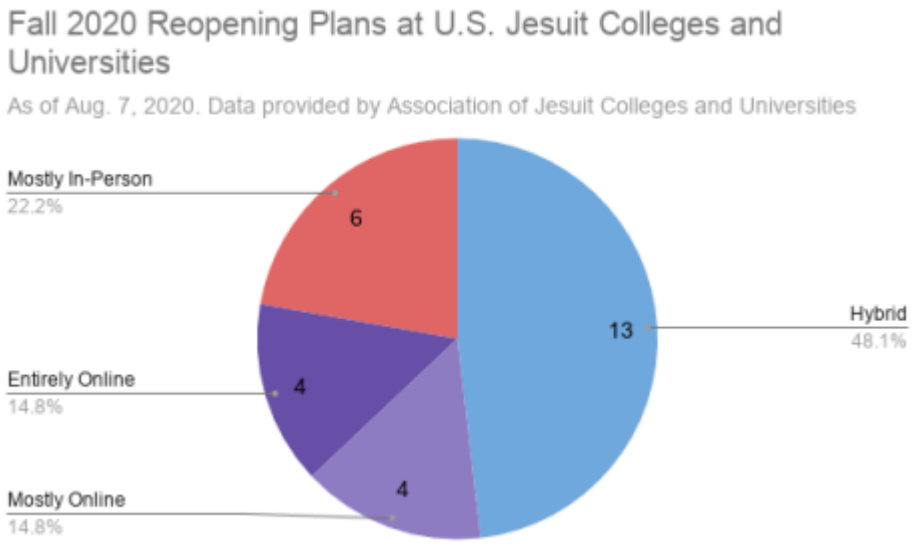
At least one Catholic college has announced that it will not survive. Holy Family College in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, will cease all operations by Aug. 29, and Notre

Dame de Namur University, the first in California to grant baccalaureate degrees to women, will not enroll new undergraduates for the 2020–21 school year. "We hope to find a way to remain open in the future, but we cannot make that guarantee," NDNU's website states.

According to Holtschneider, colleges that can afford to do so are keeping financial challenges under wraps to avoid causing alarm. "There are other schools that are really being hit hard but they don't want people to know, because then they're afraid nobody will sign up for them, and the rumor mill will actually be what closes them, not COVID," he said.

Among this semester's financial challenges will be decreased room and board revenue. Most colleges are making all their dorm rooms singles, which limits their housing capacity, Holtschneider explained. "[Colleges] are prioritizing the populations that they think most need to return, and then they're seeing, 'How much extra space do we have in bringing back others?' " he said. Ian McIvor, a junior at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, is renting a house this semester with three of his classmates in Montana, where they will take their Holy Cross classes remotely.

"Part of the reason I chose to attend Holy Cross was because of the college's Jesuit foundation, which is communicated strongly among the student body and faculty," McIvor said. "But because everything is online now, it's difficult to feel the same sense of community as there would be on campus."



Click for full-size graphic

Of the 27 U.S. member institutions of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, or AJCU, only six plan to have classes primarily in person, but those six will offer some classes online, or are prepared to do so, according to the AJCU's website. Most colleges have also shifted their academic calendars to reduce travel to and from campus. Of the AJCU's members, 22 will start the semester in August. The majority will also either conclude their fall semesters by Thanksgiving or move fully online after the holiday.

In New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, state regulations require students coming from any of the 35 U.S. states designated as coronavirus hotspots by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. Fordham University will have a new "Ram Pledge" for all community members, who must promise to wear masks and to obey directions about testing, screening, and if necessary, quarantine. Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, University of Detroit Mercy and others will have similar community pledges.

Loyola Marymount University will limit student housing so that no more than a third of its students live on campus. Canisius students will have to make reservations to eat in dining halls, said Daniel Dentino, the college's vice president of student affairs and dean of student life. According to Holtschneider, Niagara University will house some of its students in a nearby hotel.

While health and safety regulations should lessen the risk of infection, for Catholic colleges they will also present an obstacle to spiritual community.

"The challenge for all of us is to figure out how to provide spiritual support and a sense of community — a faith community that you're part of — while being socially distant on campus, and with the fact that a number of students will be staying home and taking classes remotely," said Marty Kelly, a chaplain at Holy Cross. The chaplains have organized two online retreats, and they also plan to offer livestreamed Masses, socially distanced confessions and anointing of the sick this semester, Kelly said.

Opportunities for service, another hallmark of Catholic education, will be limited this year, so Kelly is exploring ways for students to continue their involvement through mentorship at local schools or perhaps by supporting voter registration or the 2020 census.

At Santa Clara University, the Santa Clara Mission Church is a center of religious and spiritual life not just for students, but for the wider local community. In March, Santa Clara County required that the church be closed to the public, so the university has been livestreaming Masses. They had hoped to offer limited outdoor Masses for students this fall, but O'Brien announced Wednesday, Aug. 5 that the coming academic quarter will be conducted almost entirely online, and that students will not be brought back to on-campus housing, with few exceptions.



The Santa Clara Mission Church at Santa Clara University (Flickr/Ed Bierman, CC by 2.0)

As schools with hybrid reopening models try to create spiritual togetherness, their academic communities will also be split between in-person and online faculty and students. According to Dentino, about a third of both students and faculty indicated that they would prefer to work only online. But for some students, participation will be difficult or impossible if they are not on campus.

"A lot of our students go home to very challenging scenarios, and we've got a number of kids from New York City — they live in a two-bedroom apartment with their grandparents and three siblings. Technology is uneven at best," said Dentino.

To make learning as straightforward as possible, Canisius wants to provide access to residence halls, high-speed internet and computer labs, online counseling and food through the campus meal plan. Dentino estimated that some 30% of students are food insecure, which prompted the administration to increase services at the campus food pantry last year.

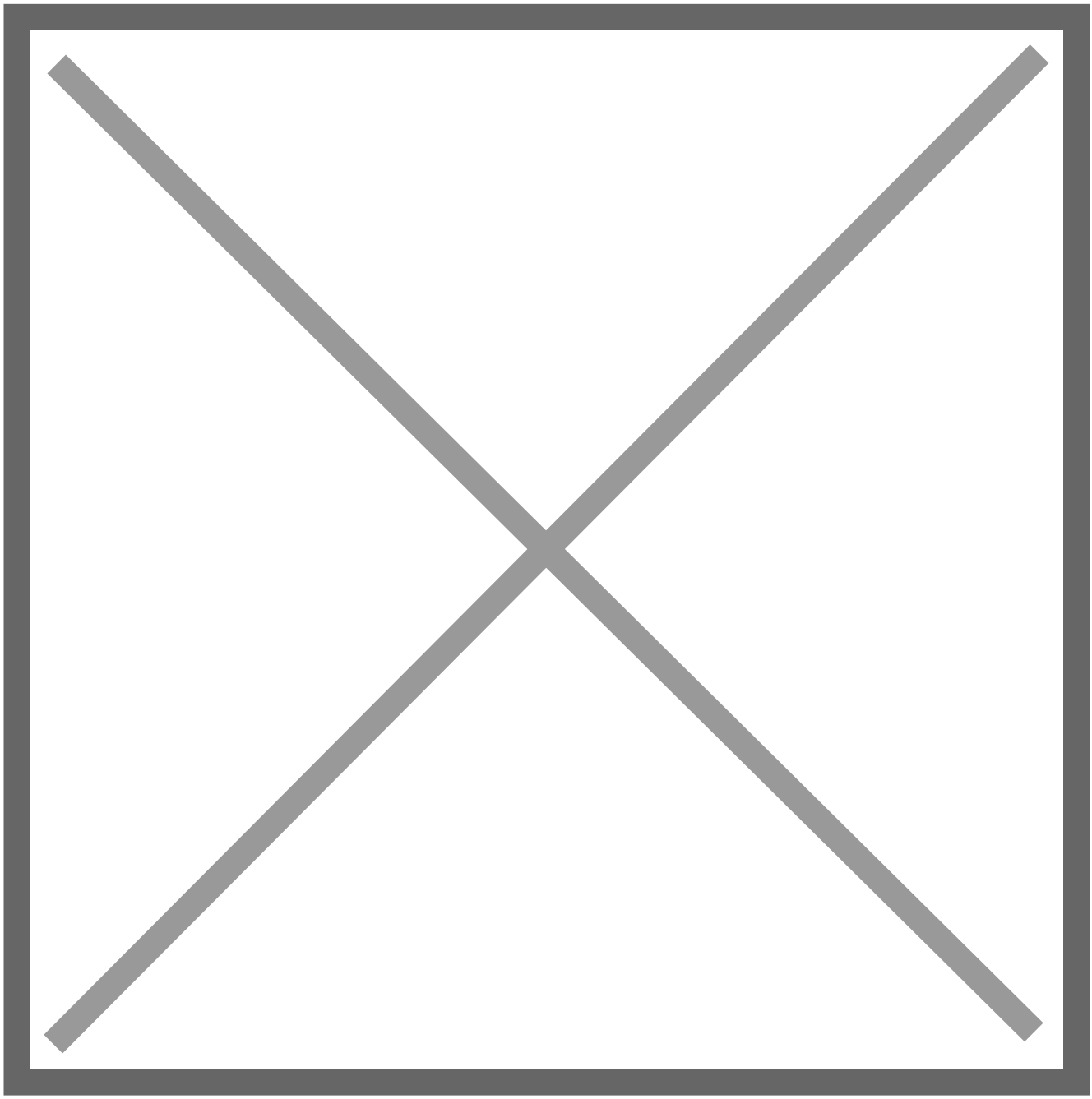
Issues of accessibility and equitability relating to race, ability and health will need to be addressed. Masks present their own challenges. Many colleges' reopening plans mandate face coverings in public spaces, but Dentino noted that some Black Canisius students have reported that they would feel uncomfortable wearing a mask in public in Buffalo for fear of being racially profiled. For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, masks can make it more difficult to understand others' speech. Those who are immunocompromised may want to learn in person, but feel that the risk is too great.

By making online learning more accessible, colleges hope to include as many students as possible. On Canvas, Santa Clara's main online educational platform, videos of Zoom lectures will be uploaded automatically so students in different time zones can view them, said Brian Larkin, the university's manager of instructional technology. Courses on Canvas will also use Ally, a software that can convert content into multiple formats (including e-book, audio and electronic Braille).

About half of Santa Clara's faculty have participated in online teaching training this summer, Larkin said. With an endowment of approximately $950 million, the university has the resources to pay professors stipends to attend workshops. Santa Clara also made a commitment in April not to lay off any employees for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, and kept that commitment by cutting other expenses. But, O'Brien said, they may not be able to keep that commitment in 2020–21.

"Almost all of the costs of a university are salaries," Holtschneider said. "Almost all the costs that students pay, [they're] paying people's salaries. And the only way to lower the cost is to fire people. That's the only thing you can do."

Still, Holtschneider said, even in cases where colleges and universities furloughed employees over the summer, many Catholic institutions retained their employees' health benefits.



The Washington campus of The Catholic University of America is shown May 18, 2020. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

Julia Young and Binh Tran, professors at the Catholic University of America, both helped to co-author a recent op-ed urging Washington, D.C. universities not to reopen physically this fall, citing the COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths that have already occurred.

Currently, Catholic University still plans to reopen, but only freshmen will be allowed to live on campus and take classes in person. Young told NCR she wants to see her students return to the classroom, but she believes moving fully online is the right thing to do. She said, however, that it would be financially devastating for Catholic University (and many other universities) *not* to bring students back to campus.

Chris Shay, Santa Clara's assistant vice president for university operations, said on July 29 that conducting courses solely online could have adverse impact for some, especially for first-generation students, who make up approximately 17% of Santa Clara's student population according to USNews.com. "We know that if we put them in an online environment there's a possibility we can lose them, and then there's lifelong health benefits that go along with higher education for them that might be lost as well," Shay said.

O'Brien's Aug. 5 statement says the school's decision was guided by health and safety concerns. "The Bay Area and California developments, particularly the ongoing challenges in testing, make clear that the threat of COVID-19 has not receded sufficiently to proceed as planned," the statement reads.

"We are letting health and safety drive this, and we are relying on the county, and on data, not just on hopes and dreams," O'Brien told NCR at the end of July.

[Lucy Grindon is an NCR Bertelsen intern. Her email address is lgrindon@ncronline.org.]

***Editor's note:** This sentence was added to clarify that Canisius College did offer to let existing majors complete their religious studies and theology degrees at Canisius.*

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