News

Jamila Griffith, left, calls a student for an appointment in the financial aid office at Holy Name

Jamila Griffith, left, calls a student for an appointment in the financial aid office at Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif., Aug. 17, 2007. University officials announced Dec. 19, 2022, that the school will close in May 2023 after educating students for 154 years. (CNS/Greg Tarczynski)



by Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Oakland, Calif. — December 27, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Citing rising operating costs, declining enrollment and an increased need for institutional aid, officials at Holy Names University in Oakland said the school will close at the end of the academic year in May.

Efforts to partner with another institution to keep the 154-year-old university open were unsuccessful, said Steven Borg, chairman of the school's board of trustees.

The school was founded by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.

"While we've had interest in long-term collaboration with potential partners, we do not have the type of interest that would sustain HNU in continuing to offer its own programs and services, so we are forced to make the difficult decision to close and designate a transfer institution in the best interest of our students," Borg said in a Dec. 19 news release.

The university said "both COVID-19 and an economic downturn disproportionately impacted" its students.

Enrollment stood at 520 undergraduates and 423 graduate students during the fall semester. Meanwhile, a total of 449 students total are registered for the spring semester that starts in January, the school reported.

The university said it had formalized an agreement with Dominican University of California in San Rafael, north of San Francisco, to transfer academic programs after the spring semester pending approval from the appropriate accreditation agency.

"First and foremost, ensuring HNU students will be able to continue their academic path forward is our top priority. We are also doing everything in our power to support our faculty and staff during this period of uncertainty," Borg said.

Dominican University officials have pledged to consider Holy Names faculty and staff for similar positions.

Dominican University President Nicola Pitchford said the mission and degree offerings of the two institutions "are beautifully aligned" and that the student populations are similar.

"Dominican has demonstrated supporting students of all backgrounds, so we know we are well prepared to help Holy Names students thrive. We look forward to inviting Holy Names University continuing students to a new, vibrant and inclusive home in San Rafael," Pitchford said in a statement.

Advertisement

Six members of the Sisters of the Holy Names, a teaching order from Quebec, founded the university in 1868. The school originally was located on the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland before moving to its current location in the Oakland Hills in 1957.

The religious congregation said it was saddened by the closing, a step described as "a painful moment for us all."

In a statement, the order said it was "immensely proud of the 154-year history and legacy" of the university.

"Our hearts and prayers are with current HNU students, faculty, staff, alumni, and all who are part of this beloved institution," the sisters said.

The congregation also thanks the board of trustees for doing all that was possible to ensure that the university remained open.

"We know that they have worked tirelessly and with the highest integrity, loyalty, expertise and commitment to the HNU mission," the Sisters of the Holy Names added.

Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland also expressed sadness over the closing and credited the Sisters of the Holy Names for their commitment to higher education.

"This unfortunate situation is occurring at small colleges throughout the United States. I fully support the actions of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, the HNU board, its chair and president, who have kept me and my advisers apprised of the difficult situation they face," he said in a statement.

Borg said the rising cost to attend college had "become a challenge for many students and their families." Despite providing "significant institutional aid" to students, the school remained dependent on tuition and residence hall revenue to continue operating, he explained.

The board of trustees decided in November 2021 to seek a merger with another institution, but such talks were unsuccessful, Borg said. Complicating factors included a $49 million debt on the school's property and the cost of deferred maintenance on a 65-year-old campus, estimated to be as much as $200 million, he said.

"The financial situation of the university changed dramatically this fall. It was a herculean effort to find a path to the spring semester and allow HNU an orderly end. This included the procurement of additional financial resources and collaboration with Dominican," Borg said.

The school "continues to face "some hurdles" and must finalize agreements "to solidify the pathway to May 2023 graduation and close," he added without elaboration.