News
Analysis



Students leave after attending a Catholic Mass at Benedictine College on Dec. 3, 2023, in Atchison, Kan. (AP/Charlie Riedel)



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December 4, 2025
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In September, 15 students began online classes at a new university in California being billed as a place "where your faith meets your STEM career." And not just any STEM career. Jennifer Nolan, the co-founder and president of Catholic Polytechnic University, hopes the school will one day be known as a "Catholic MIT" or "Catholic Caltech."

Nolan, a homeschooling mom and neuroscientist, couldn't find a tech school where she could be sure her kids wouldn't be "talked out of their faith," she said. So she started her own, helped by a donor who has allowed the school to offer bachelor's and master's degrees currently free of tuition. It will also send students away with a deepened sense of Catholic identity and practice, as all faculty are practicing Catholics and will weave faith, ethics and virtue into their coursework, Nolan said.

"I think in this day and age people who choose to be Catholic — like all of these Catholic converts that are on the rise among the youth — they want something that is truly aligned with the teachings of the magisterium," Nolan said, identifying potential students as rosary-carrying daily Massgoers who practice perpetual adoration and who "really want to live their faith."

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An educational niche aimed at conservative Catholics seems to be a successful business model, mirroring an explosion in so-called classical religious high schools

that court a similar demographic. While some smaller Catholic colleges and universities are closing, merging or eliminating programs, many schools with reputations as friendly to "trad Catholics" are reporting enrollment growth and financial health, even in an admittedly formidable time for higher education.

In addition to Catholic Polytechnic, Rosary College in Greenville, South Carolina, and several new Catholic trade schools have opened this year. Rosary, which will offer classes toward an associate's degree, was founded by Fr. Dwight Longenecker, a sometimes controversial conservative blogger who is a convert from Protestant fundamentalism.

Evangelical Christians have long marketed Christian colleges as safe spaces where parents can be reassured their children will not be "radicalized" into political liberalism or questioning of their faith. In Catholic circles, such colleges are often identified by inclusion on a list by the Cardinal Newman Society, which describes itself as "promoting and defending faithful Catholic education."



The Newman Guide seal. (Courtesy)

The society's "Newman Guide" lists schools it deems as "faithful," based on criteria such as whether faculty and the president make a public profession of faith; the percentage of faculty, trustees and students who identify as Catholic; and policies prohibiting honors and speaking invitations to those who question Catholic moral teachings. Single-sex dorms and regular Mass, confessions and adoration are also pluses.

The assumption is that "much of secular education is opposed to Catholic belief and morality," according to the society's web page. "On the other hand, sadly much of Catholic higher education has been compromised by ideology, infidelity, and scandal … "

Among those making the recommended list are The Catholic University of America in Washington; Ave Maria University in Florida; the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas; Wyoming Catholic College in Lander, Wyoming; the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota; Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas; Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio; and Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia.

Catholic schools are not immune to the challenges in higher education today, including demographic shifts that have led to enrollment declines, rising costs, recent freezes to federal research funding and uncertainty around the Trump administration's attacks on diversity and other programs. In 2024, at least 20 U.S. colleges and universities closed, and analysts predict hundreds of closures in the next decade.

Two years ago, the Newman Society released a press release proclaiming that schools on the list were "bursting with success," with "unprecedented enrollment numbers and financial support" in the 2023-24 academic year. More recent stats confirm that several schools have reported positive enrollment and growth.

This fall, Franciscan University of Steubenville welcomed an incoming class of record size, as it has for the past 11 years. This comes on the heels of the university graduating its largest class ever last spring. Steubenville also recently completed a $16.5 million renovation of its chapel, nearly doubling its capacity. The project was part of a capital campaign that raised $126 million for scholarships, academic programs and a new event center.



Kansas City Chiefs' kicker Harrison Butker delivers the Benedictine College commencement address on May 11, 2024, in Atchison, Kan. (Video screen grab)

Benedictine College in Kansas — the product of a merger of two smaller schools in 1971 – may be best known for a 2024 graduation speech by Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker, who made headlines for denouncing Pride Month, "gender ideology" and "the tyranny of diversity, equity and inclusion." The publicity around the speech may have boosted its name recognition, but the school had already seen enrollment double, the construction of new buildings and a substantial increase in fundraising and endowment over the last two decades.

In its 20-year history, Wyoming Catholic College, the only Catholic college in the state, has grown from a couple dozen students to an enrollment of 179. It gained international prominence when one of its students was selected to attend the Vatican's global synod meetings in Rome.

More than two-thirds of its students have been homeschooled, and they come from an average family size of six children. The campus has an emphasis on outdoorsmanship and does not allow cellphones, televisions, alcohol or sex outside of marriage. Despite a fraud scandal in 2021 involving the school's chief financial officer, which resulted in the loss of a $10 million donation, Wyoming Catholic had

$14.5 million in revenue in 2023, the latest year for which tax data is available.

Donna Carroll, executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, acknowledges the growth among some of these conservative schools but sees Catholic schools attracting students more broadly. Although the ACCU does not collect enrollment data, she has found that many Catholic institutions — especially smaller ones, and not just those seeking to attract more traditionalist students — have had overall enrollment increases this fall.

"These are morally treacherous times, and it is not surprising that families are choosing faith-based higher education for its community orientation and for the promise of a values-driven educational setting," she said in an email interview. "Catholic campuses, in general, have seen fewer protests, and are actively engaged in relationship building — a counter narrative that appeals to students after the isolation of the pandemic. The fact that equity and inclusion are deeply held expressions of mission also resonates with many."

That some of the more conservative Catholic colleges and universities may not be facing as many financial challenges as other institutions could be the result of several factors, Carroll said. "Their student bodies are, in general, less diverse, so the institutions are likely not to have the same exposure to demographic and economic shifts or rescinded Hispanic-Serving Institution grants or international student visa issues," she said. "Most are located on self-contained campuses in suburban or rural areas. Some have wealthy sponsors."

Several of the schools, including Christendom and Wyoming Catholic, refuse to accept any federal government money, including Pell grants for students.

But not all schools that attract traditionalist students are avoiding financial challenges or the demographic cliff of fewer college-bound students after Generation Z.

In May, The Catholic University of America cut 68 positions, or 7% of its workforce, to address a $30 million deficit due to rising costs and declining enrollment. Other austerity measures included frozen salary increases and voluntary buyouts for faculty.

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Operating expenses at the university had increased by 24% and revenue fell by more than 21% between 2019 and 2024, while enrollment dropped by nearly 800 students. CUA was founded by the U.S. Catholic bishops and is a pontifical university, meaning it is approved by the Holy See to grant ecclesiastical degrees.

Ave Maria University, originally founded in 1998 by Domino's pizza magnate Tom Monaghan in Michigan, has not reached its ambitious enrollment goals since moving in 2007 to Florida with plans for a university campus and adjoining conservative Catholic town. The economic crisis of 2008, combined with rising costs and the troubled Florida real estate market, led to a $10 million deficit. Today's enrollment is about 1,300 students, far short of the Catholic "Ivy" status Monaghan first imagined. Ave Maria was not mentioned in the Newman press release touting financial success.

Although traditionalist Catholic families, especially those who homeschool their children, may provide a pipeline to these schools, Catholic Polytechnic has recruited primarily among first-generation families, Nolan said. They may be attracted to the free tuition, but also skeptical of other Catholic educational institutions after some "went a little Catholic 'light' and downplayed their Catholicism" after the 1967 Land O'Lakes statement, she said.

That document, the culmination of a meeting of Catholic higher education leaders in Wisconsin who gathered to reassess their institutions in light of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, called for autonomy and academic freedom. Two decades later, then-Pope John Paul II sought to reassert stricter communion with the church through the local bishop with the apostolic constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae. Conservative Catholic colleges often tout that their theology professors have gained the required "mandatum" from their local bishop.

Still, the 20 colleges on the Newman Society list represent a minority of the 230 degree-granting Catholic institutions in the United States that collectively enroll more than 700,000 students, according to data from ACCU. Those other schools maintain their Catholic identity, while attracting diverse student bodies, Carroll said.

"It is true that families are attracted to some of our institutions because they are explicitly Catholic, but most Catholic colleges and universities today are religiously diverse, still with strong Catholic and congregational identities," she said. "Often, students of other faiths, looking for a spiritual dimension to their college experience, are attracted to these Catholic institutions."