News
Analysis



Students and community members attend the annual Festival of Lights celebration before Las Posadas to mark the beginning of the Advent season in Dec. 2024 at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas. (RNS/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)



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Oliver Ortega, a doctoral English student at the University of Notre Dame, said he began attending Mass regularly after arriving on campus, immersing himself in a faith he held only loosely while growing up in Queens, New York. " I've become more Catholic, I think, in large part because of being here," he says.

But at Notre Dame, Ortega said he has spent less time investing in his Latino identity. At Northwestern University, where he was an undergraduate, he was part of a robust community of Latino students.

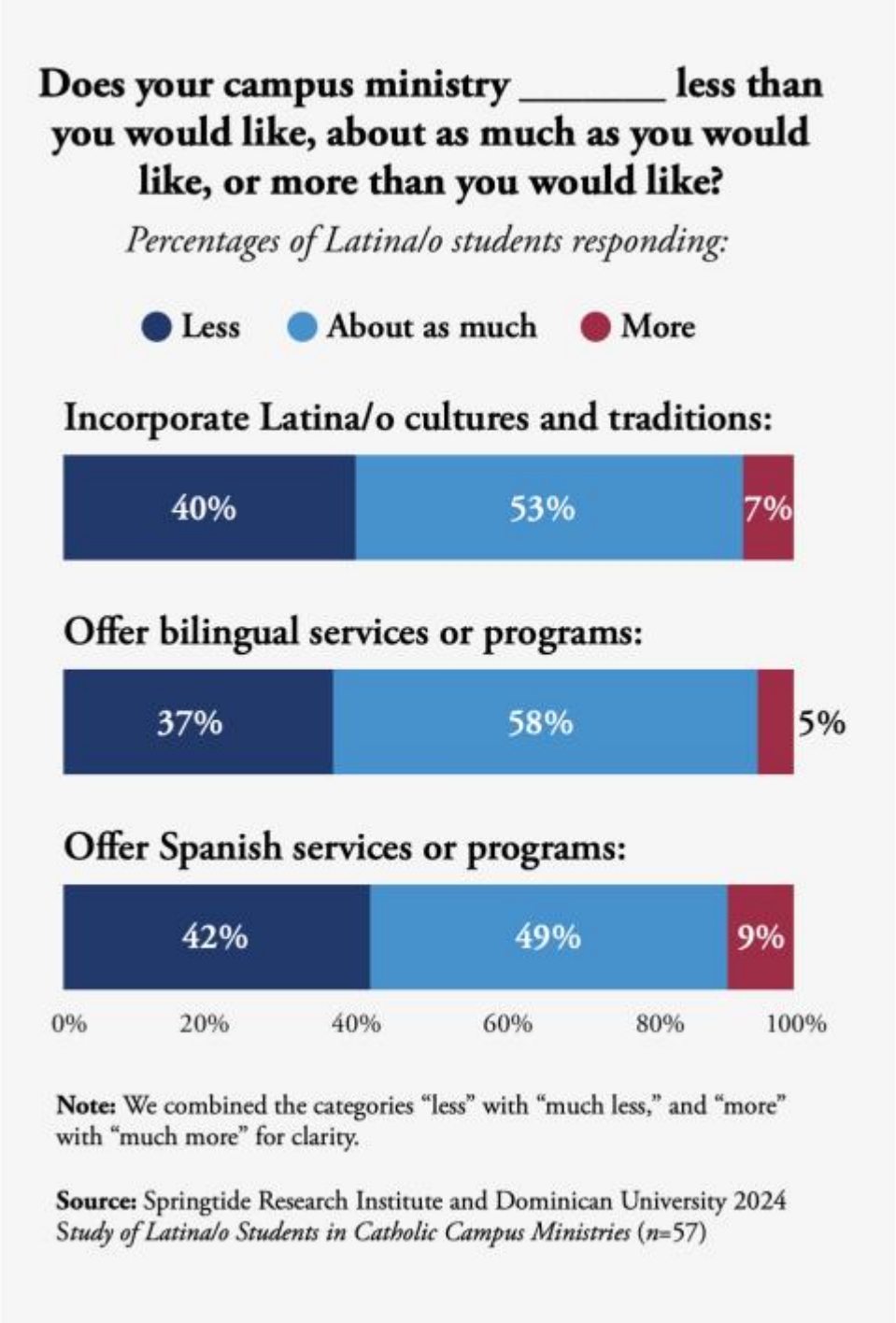
Sixty percent of Catholics under 18 identify as Hispanic, but Latinos are underrepresented at Catholic universities. Latinos are also a minority among campus ministers and make up less than 10% of theology students. Experts worry that this lack of access will mean fewer Latinos becoming priests, sisters and others serving the church, even as the church works to transform its institutions to reflect its changing demographics.

Liza Manjarrez, senior associate director of campus ministry at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, said Latino ministers were rare in the Catholic spaces she knew growing up and at the Catholic schools where she earned her bachelor's degree and two master's. When she came to St. Edward's, where about half the students are Latino, in 2008, Manjarrez was "really intentional" about promoting "Latinx leadership on campus in a variety of different ways, but particularly within the church, within trying to create new leadership in the church universal."

" My goal for ministry in general is that it represents what the church looks like, and the church is becoming more and more Latinx, more and more Latino," said Manjarrez.

That doesn't mean they are Catholic. Among the Latinos who attended last year's Las Posadas, some said they were evangelical Protestants or had a casual relationship with faith. Manjarrez said that her office can't presume that any two students speak the same languages at home, hail from the same country of origin or have the same economic resources. Campus ministers must be as ready to bless a student's horned lizard as they are to prepare students for Catholic confirmation.

Colleges across the country are developing ministry programs to support Latino students. At Dominican University in Chicago, where nearly 7 in 10 students are Hispanic, a 7-year-old series of conferences called ¡El Futuro is Here! draws campus ministers, faculty, staff, administrators and Latino students from across the U.S. to share best practices for including and celebrating Latino students.



(Courtesy of Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University)

In 2022, with a nearly $1.5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, Dominican launched the PASOS network to help Catholic universities develop culturally responsive campus ministries for Latino students. It has commissioned Springtide Research Institute to conduct a study on the topic, held workshops and presentations and partnered on a summer theology program for undergraduates. It

also created an undergraduate theology and arts journal called Nepantla. (Editor's note: Religion News Service receives financial support from the Lilly Endowment.)

Armando Guerrero Estrada, the director of PASOS, said Latino students who have attended its conferences say "they just wanted to be heard. They just wanted to be seen, and they wanted to be included in the decision-making of their campus ministries."

Many Latinos grow up translating for their parents, caring for siblings or taking on jobs, Guerrero Estrada said. "They're coming (to) us with all of these different leadership skills that they've learned throughout their lives, and now they're being presented with opportunities to "desarrollar," or develop, those leadership skills for organizational purposes or for social justice purposes."

Many Latino students are commuters who juggle paid work and family responsibilities in addition to their studies. " How can we do spiritual development, spiritual formation without intruding on their necessity to take on a shift to pay for tuition or to help at home?" said Andrew Mercado, director of university ministry at Dominican.

At Dominican, campus ministers look for time with overscheduled students during breaks between classes instead of at night. At St. Edward's, Manjarrez supports students who are questioning whether they should drop out to financially support their immigrant parents who are at risk under the Trump administration's mass-deportation campaign or facing other hardships.

Manjarrez said that she prays for them and listens to them. " I'm just a sower of the seed, right? I'm not the master builder. I am not the master gardener. I can only do what I'm able to do. And then ultimately, I also have to leave it in the hands of God."

Campus ministers say they often have to overcome students' negative experiences with the church. Guerrero Estrada said that " in my conversations with students who come into my office, it's really helping them understand that the church is much larger than some of the experiences that they've had with institutional members who have been maybe negative when it comes to issues of LGBTQ acceptance."

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Sr. Christin Tomy, a member of the Sinsinawa Dominican order who joined the university's ministry team in 2024, said non-Latinos can be involved in culturally responsive campus ministry. One key for her, she said, has been to recognize the importance of hospitality to Latino students. Many have stepped forward to intern with the ministry to make others feel welcome and show students they can be themselves.

" At the beginning I felt like, who am I to come in and be the recipient of such a welcome and such hospitality?" Tomy said. But then she realized, "that is foundational to the mutuality of this relationship."

Evelyn Acosta Celestino, who interns in the campus ministry office, found its canoeing and camping retreats not only gave her a break from the stresses of college, but also allowed her to reconnect with her faith. "That's when I really felt that sense of community, that sense of 'Hey, we're here for you,'" she said.

The education at Dominican can also make Latino students feel empowered. Mercado said Latino students, many of whom have never been exposed to Latino theologians, can "immerse themselves in the history and the richness of Hispanic Catholicism in the U.S. and the contributions of Latinos in the U.S. Catholic Church."

Mercado said he has witnessed a transformation when students see that " my background and my realities as a Latino, as a Latina in the U.S., enriches the Catholic church."

Viviana Soria, who transferred to Dominican from community college this fall to study theology, has been soaking up all of the opportunities for "nerding out" in theology classes. "All of my theology courses have really reignited my passion for learning and ministry," said Soria, a campus ministry volunteer who said she feels a call to Latino youth ministry. A recent conversation about gender, migration and the Bible, she said, had helped her explore her identity as a Latina and connect that to her faith.

But some of the most powerful work campus ministers do is to show students that their Latino culture and faith have a place on campus. At Dominican, accompanying students has included praying the rosary bilingually with them, attending Eucharistic adoration and marking Dia de los Muertos, Three Kings Day, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and other celebrations important to Latino cultures.

As Christmas approaches each year at St. Edward's, Manjarrez leads students of all backgrounds in the Latino Advent tradition of Las Posadas, reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging before Jesus' birth, as they start with prayer and carols from a hill with a view of the Austin skyline and move through campus.

" We're just trying to get them in the door to come to church. We're just trying to remind them we're still here," said Manjarrez.