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The crisis that isn't

Dennis Coday | Feb. 4, 2010 NCR Today

Yesterday's Morning Briefing (a daily feature on this blog) had a link to media release titled New Study Confirms Crisis in Catholic Higher Education [1]. The source of this release is The Cardinal Newman Society, a self-appointed watchdog of Catholic colleges and universities.

The society looked at a study presented to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) by researchers at Georgetown University?s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and concluded that attending a Catholic college has minimal impact on a Catholic student?s practice and embrace of the Catholic faith.

But not so fast.

Our Washington correspondent Jerry Filteau was at the recent meeting of the ACCU and he heard the CARA presentation on their study. Filteau reports: Catholic higher education enhances students' Catholic identity [2].

The Georgetown researchers said that for a variety of reasons, for the past several decades in their years after high school, American youths have tended to show less denominational attachment and lower attendance at religious services than they exhibited during their years in elementary and secondary school.

But they said that youths -- Catholic and non-Catholic -- who go to college show less drop-off in those areas than youths who do not go on to higher education. And, more to the point for those who go one to college, among Catholic youths, those attending Catholic colleges and universities show less drop-off in those areas than those who attend public or private (sectarian or secular) non-Catholic colleges.

Here's what InsideHigherEd.com, which also had a reporter at the meeting, reported [3]:

> The new [CARA] study doesn't dispute that many Catholic students at Catholic colleges disagree with some church teachings, especially those on abortion and gay marriage. But by asking a different question -- did Catholic students move closer to or further away from church teachings during their time at college? -- the new analysis suggests that Catholic colleges are not the heresy-producers they are accused of being.
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> The research finds that Catholic students at Catholic colleges are less likely than Catholic students at other colleges to move away from the church and more likely to turn toward it. Further, the study finds that the Catholic students at Catholic colleges -- while moving away from the church on some issues -- more toward the church on others, including both political and philosophical views and specific actions, such as the reading of sacred texts.
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> Over all, the study finds that Catholic students "remain profoundly connected to their faith" as they progress in college.

One more interesting point to tease out of this study is the findings on same sex marriage. Here's how our colleagues at Catholic News Service report it:

> Regarding same-sex marriage, the study said there is no other issue on which Catholic students -- regardless of where they attended school -- moved further away from the church. Only one in three Catholics on Catholic campuses disagreed "somewhat" or "strongly" that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. Catholics on non-Catholic campuses were slightly less likely to disagree.
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> "This issue more than any other may be strongly affected by the millennial generation's post-materialist view regarding marriage and sexuality," said the study's authors, Mark Gray and Melissa Cidade.

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[1] http://www.catholic.org/collegiate/story.php?id=35343
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