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Experts challenge Santorum's remarks linking college to faith loss

Cathy Grossman USA Today | Feb. 27, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum's claim that U.S. colleges drive young Christians out of church is facing scrutiny from Protestant and Catholic experts.

Santorum told talk show host Glenn Beck on Thursday (Feb. 23) that "62 percent of kids who go into college with a faith commitment leave without it." He also has called President Obama a "snob" for wanting more Americans to attend college.

"There is no statistical difference in the dropout rate among those who attended college and those that did not attend college," said Thom Rainer, president of the Southern Baptists' LifeWay Christian Resources research firm. "Going to college doesn't make you a religious dropout."

A 2007 LifeWay survey did find seven in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 who went to church regularly in high school said they quit attending by age 23.
The real causes: lack of "a robust faith," strongly committed parents and an essential church connection, Rainer said.

"Higher education is not the villain," said Catholic University sociologist William D'Antonio. Since 1986, D'Antonio's surveys of American Catholics have asked about Mass attendance, the importance of religion in people's lives and whether they have considered leaving Catholicism.

The percentage of Catholics who scored low on all three points hovers between 18 percent in 1993 and 14 percent in 2011. But the percentage of people who are highly committed fell from 27 percent to 19 percent.

"Blame mortality," D'Antonio said, "The most highly committed Catholics are seniors, and they're dying out."

Dennis Prager, a conservative writer on religious and political issues, decried secularism in Western universities in the National Review in April. He concluded, "With all the persecution that Judaism and Christianity have survived over the centuries, an argument that cites America's Top 310 Colleges as a first order adversary is hard to credit."

Cathy Lynn Grossman writes for USA Today.

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