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Catholic higher ed enhances Catholic identity

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 4, 2010

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Catholic colleges and universities produce more committed and practicing adult Catholics than do non-Catholic institutions of higher learning across the country, said two reports at the annual national meeting in Washington of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

Richard A Yanikoski, outgoing ACCU president and CEO, sharply challenged contrary reports in his presidential address Feb. 1 at the close of the association's gathering.

"Certain well-funded organizations external to the USCCB [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops] and to Catholic higher education have made it their purpose to convince bishops, priests and the lay faithful that most of Catholic higher education is going astray," he said

"These critics' perceptions are skewed by limited observation and a pre-ordained agenda," he said. He added that their criticisms, often widely publicized in the media, "infect how Catholic higher education is viewed by all who have a stake in the enterprise."

The Jan. 30-Feb. 1 gathering of the ACCU also featured a report by the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate on a three-year sociological study comparing religious belief and practice changes among Catholic students in Catholic higher education with those same changes among Catholic students in non-Catholic institutions.

The researchers said the results challenge a recent Cardinal Newman Society claim that Catholic colleges and universities are failing in their mission because their students become less Catholic over their years in a Catholic university environment.

For a variety of reasons, they said, 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.

In short, as Yanikoski put it, "Most young adults of typical (college) undergraduate age go through a period of faith attenuation regardless of whether or where they go to college. It is a stage of life in Western society in which young women and men instinctively push against authority figures and dominant institutions as they go about finding their own social, intellectual and spiritual footing."

"A baseline to keep in mind when judging the impact of Catholic colleges on Catholic students is that only 30 percent of all adult U.S. Catholics attend weekly Mass," Yanikoski said. "CARA has estimated from seven

national surveys that this figure drops to 26 percent for Catholics who attended non-Catholic colleges and rises to 39 percent for those who attended Catholic colleges."

The CARA report said that on most points of adherence to Catholic teaching and discipline, Catholics attending Catholic colleges and universities for the previous three years were more likely than their counterparts in non-Catholic institutions to have agreed with church teachings, to have continued attending religious services frequently and to have continued or increased their prayer life.

The CARA report was based on multiple analyses of a survey that the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) conducted with more than 14,000 college students on 148 campuses nationwide -- first in 2004 with incoming freshmen and again in the spring of 2007 with those same students as they were completing their third year in college.

About 23 percent of the students surveyed were Catholic and they included Catholics attending Catholic schools and Catholics attending public and non-Catholic private schools. CARA said students at one-seventh of the nation's 220 Catholic colleges and universities were among institutions attended by those surveyed

"As juniors, 42 percent of Catholics at Catholic colleges and universities say they attended religious services frequently while in college," the report said. "This attendance rate is higher than Catholics at any other type of campus by more than 10 percentage points. It is also the case that fewer Catholics report a decline in their attendance on Catholic campuses while in college than Catholics at any other type of college."

Yanikoski said the CARA findings of lower religious affiliation, practice and belief among Catholic students at Catholic institutions are "disturbing" at one level, but when they are compared with the levels of church affiliation, belief and practice among young Catholics attending other institutions of higher learning, they are positive.

"They should not be a surprise and should not be interpreted as a specific outcome of students' attendance at a Catholic college or university," he said. "The primary causes [of young Catholic disengagement from the church] are elsewhere and are known: weakened family life and diminished religious activity among Catholic families; ineffective catechesis in parishes and understaffed faith formation programs for youth; pervasive secular content in all media; digital distractions of every type; rampant individualism often unaccompanied by the constraints of moral training; a sexually provocative culture; and a church scarred by the sex-abuse scandal."

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