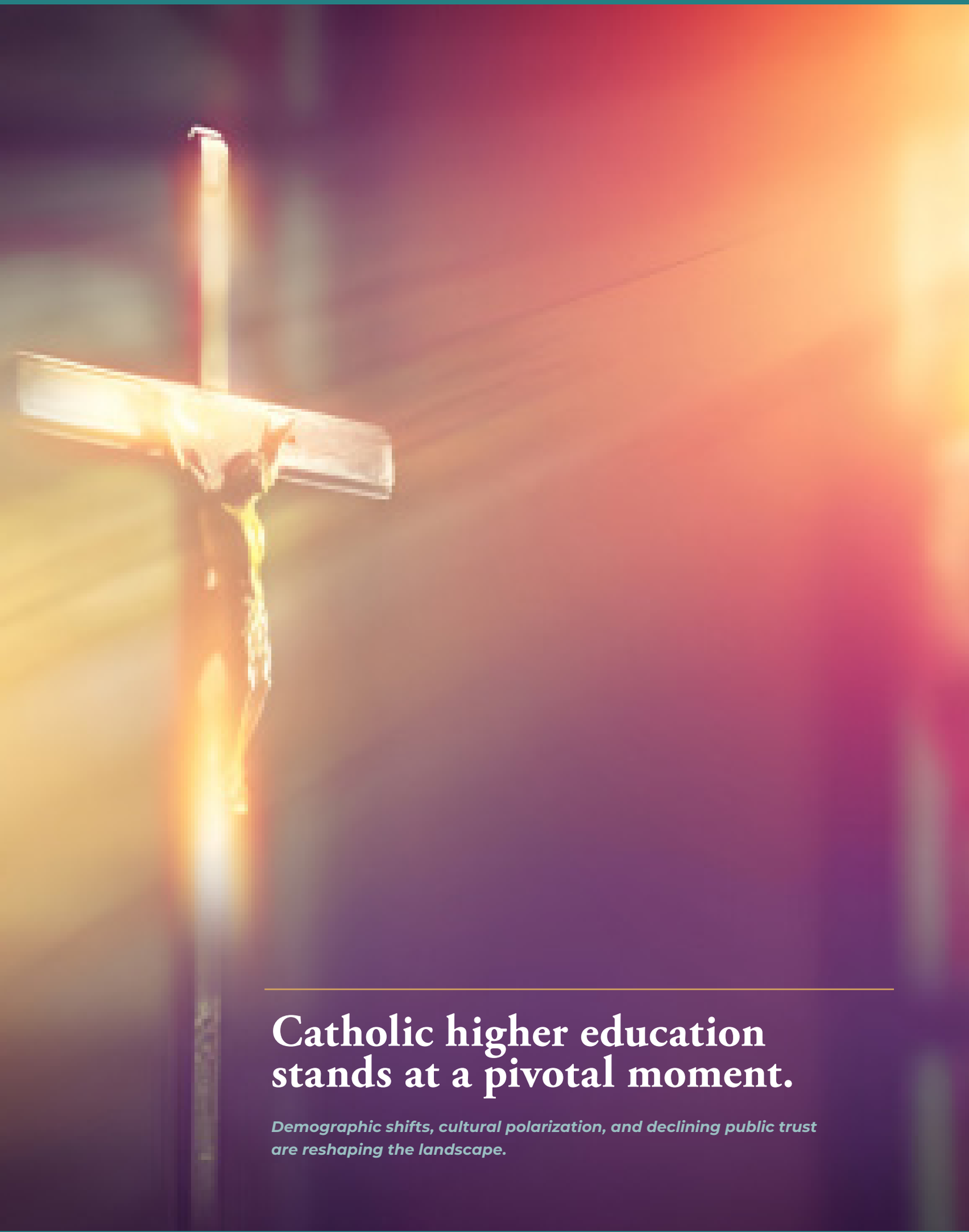
Research Study



2025 CATHOLIC IDENTITY & ENROLLMENT STUDY

Mission, Messaging, and Growth in a Time of Change



Catholic higher education stands at a pivotal moment.

Demographic shifts, cultural polarization, and declining public trust are reshaping the landscape.

A WORD FROM *the Project Lead*

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION STANDS AT A DEFINING MOMENT. Colleges and universities rooted in this tradition are navigating declining demographics, political and ideological polarization, and shrinking public trust in higher education—particularly in the liberal arts. The tension between sustaining mission and achieving growth has never felt sharper. Yet this moment also holds extraordinary possibility.

The Catholic intellectual tradition has long offered a framework for meaning-making that transcends ideology. It invites us to interrogate our assumptions, engage others with respect, and recognize the inherent dignity of each person. At its best, Catholic education shapes graduates who not only think critically but live generously—people whose lives are defined by love, curiosity, and service, no matter what they believe or who they are.

I write this not from the vantage point of theology, but from lived experience. I became, quite unintentionally, a product of Catholic liberal arts education.

In 2006, I landed at St. Norbert College through a partnership with my German university and was transformed by the experience. I ran through every possible wall to stay—to transfer, to graduate, and to root myself in the kind of intellectual and personal formation I found there. Those experiences launched a lifelong commitment to higher education, and I have found profound joy in helping institutions of all types and sizes communicate their transformative impact and grow their enrollment ever since.

My year as Fractional Chief Marketing Officer at Assumption University in 2023–24 reminded me how powerful the Catholic liberal arts mission remains—and how much work there is to do to help prospective students and their parents truly understand it. Catholic higher education changes lives, yet its message often fails to connect with those who would most benefit from it.

This study, developed in partnership between Viv and Loper, seeks to bridge that gap.

Drawing on website and enrollment data, presidential interviews, a student survey, and social listening, our goal was to uncover how mission and market can work in concert rather than at odds. The central question is simple but profound:

How can Catholic colleges and universities grow through their mission, not away from it—and communicate that mission in ways that resonate across beliefs, backgrounds, and generations?

I'm deeply grateful to the colleagues who helped bring this work to life. The study was co-led by **Kate Jackson-Meyer, PhD,** whose theological insight kept our work rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition; **Allison Turcio, EdD,** whose perspective as an enrollment and marketing leader illuminated practical pathways for application; **Eric Menna** and the **Loper** team, whose innovative student engagement platform made our prospective student research possible; and **Dave Brinker,** who led our data analysis with rigor and care.

My hope is that these findings serve as both affirmation and challenge. The Catholic intellectual tradition has guided countless people toward lives of meaning. It can also guide us now—as leaders, educators, and communities—toward a renewed vision of growth rooted in love, reason, and the dignity of every human person. The pages that follow share what we found—and what might come next.



Suzan Brinker, Ph.D.
Founder & CEO, Viv Higher Education

Executive Summary

Catholic higher education stands at a pivotal moment. Demographic decline, cultural polarization, and waning public trust in higher education have forced institutions to confront hard questions about relevance and identity. Yet within this uncertainty lies extraordinary opportunity.

The ***2025 Catholic Identity & Enrollment Study***—conducted by Viv Higher Education in partnership with Loper—explores how Catholic colleges and universities can sustain mission and achieve growth in this changing environment. The research draws on an analysis of 150 institutional websites, a survey of more than 200 prospective students, 20 in-depth presidential interviews, a social-listening review, and an examination of recent scholarship and national data.

Across every data source, one conclusion emerged clearly:

MISSION AND GROWTH ARE NOT OPPOSITES—THEY ARE INTERDEPENDENT.

Institutions that live their Catholic identity with confidence and clarity are not only preserving their charisms—they are differentiating themselves in the market and growing enrollment.

:: METHODOLOGY ::

150+
INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITE ANALZED

20
PRESIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS

200+
STUDENTS SURVEYED

SOCIAL-LISTENING REVIEW

NATIONAL DATA + SCHOLARSHIP SCAN

Key Findings

- **Mission as Practice, Not Policy:** The most authentic institutions move beyond statements of faith to lived culture, where every employee—faculty, staff, and leadership—embodies Catholic values of dignity, respect, and service. Living the mission supersedes what we say.
- **Confidence and Clarity:** Former hesitation to lead with Catholic identity has recently shifted to increasingly confident, invitational expressions of mission that emphasize intellectual rigor, moral formation, and belonging.
- **Inclusivity Through Tradition:** Many institutional leaders across the country and institution types are reframing diversity and inclusion work through Catholic social teaching, grounding equity efforts in the shared belief that every person is made in the image of God.
- **Formation as Continuity:** Institutional leaders recognize that, given the overall decline in the number of vowed religious people, formation for lay faculty and staff has become the linchpin of long-term mission stewardship.
- **Language and Relevance:** Students resonate more with the universal outcomes of Catholic education—purpose, community, impact—than with institutional or theological jargon. Translating charisms into accessible language is key to resonance.
- **Growth Through Authenticity:** Data show that enrollment gains are strongest at institutions that integrate mission visibly and consistently across marketing, academics, and student life in a way that resonates with both Catholic and non-Catholic audiences.
- **Tailored Alignment for Growth:** There is no one-size-fits-all model for Catholic higher education; instead, each institution can achieve growth by strategically aligning its unique mission with market demand through a customized approach.

The Central Argument

Mission is not a constraint on growth. It is its foundation. The Catholic intellectual tradition offers what today's students crave most besides career preparation: belonging and purpose.

When institutions articulate that tradition in clear, inclusive, and compelling ways, they can bridge the gap between faith and modern aspirations.

Implications

Catholic colleges and universities have a distinctive opportunity to model coherence, clarity, and courage in a fractured world. Aligning mission and market strategy, evolving messaging frameworks to resonate across belief and ideology, and investing in mission formation for lay leadership will determine the sector's long-term vitality.

CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE REMAINS WHAT IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN:
ITS ABILITY TO FORM PEOPLE WHO THINK DEEPLY, ACT ETHICALLY, AND SERVE OTHERS WITH PURPOSE.

The challenge now is to say that—and, even more importantly, live it—so the world can hear.

INTRODUCTION: THE CROSSROADS OF MISSION & GROWTH

We are at a crossroads. The number of U.S. 18-year-olds is projected to peak around 2025 at roughly 3.9 million, and then begin a decline that will reduce the traditional-age college-entry pool by about 13 percent by 2041[1]. Meanwhile, college-going rates have slipped—from approximately 70 percent in 2016 to 62 percent by 2022[2]—exacerbating the demographic squeeze.

At the same time, Catholic higher education must navigate a society increasingly divided on values, identity, and the role of liberal education. Public trust in higher education broadly, and the liberal arts in particular, has eroded amid questions of cost and relevance. Only 36 percent of U.S. adults now say they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education[3].

In that environment, the mission-growth tension takes concrete shape: many Catholic institutions feel pressure to grow enrollment, diversify revenue, and broaden impact, even as they navigate how to remain faithful to their distinctive charisms. The challenge is often framed as a binary—mission or growth. We believe the more compelling question is:

How can mission enable growth? Catholic higher education is most powerful when it helps students—of whatever faith background—lead lives of meaning, belonging, and contribution.

The Catholic intellectual tradition invites people to transcend the self, to see themselves as part of a larger story, and to engage the world with both humility and hope. Most Catholic colleges and universities today do not enroll a majority Catholic student body[4], underscoring the need for inclusive, mission-rooted messaging that resonates broadly.

The purpose of this study is to illuminate how mission and market can become allies. We explore how Catholic colleges and universities present their identity today, how prospective students respond, how leaders are steering amidst change—and what the data suggest for the future.

THE LANDSCAPE

Catholic Higher Education Today

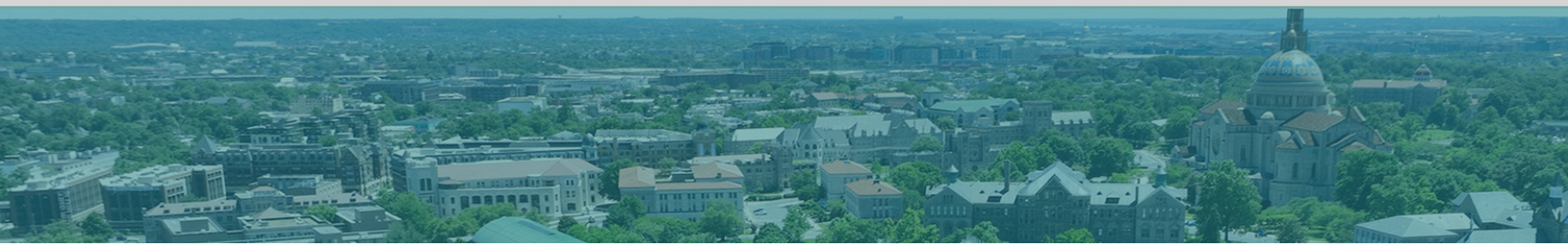
Across the U.S., roughly **260 institutions** of higher education identify as Catholic. About one-third of these are seminaries or nursing programs affiliated with hospitals, collectively serving more than **800,000 students**[5]. Most were founded by religious orders—about **90 percent** historically had religious-order presidents and faculty—but the number of vowed religious is rapidly shrinking: an estimated **70 percent of religious-order members are now age 70 or older**[6].

That demographic reality is reshaping mission stewardship and governance across Catholic higher education. At the same time, the student composition is shifting. The Cardinal Newman Society has reported that the Catholic universities they recommend in The Newman Guide have experienced enrollment growth over the past few years.[7] The schools in the Newman Guide are chosen "for their commitment to a faithful Catholic education," as determined by the Cardinal Newman Society, and the Society attributes enrollment growth to students' desires for "a faithful Catholic education." This tells us something about the schools the Society recommends, but it tells us little about other Catholic universities and how to understand the Catholic university enrollment landscape nationally as a whole.

In this evolving context, the way mission shows up—from curriculum design to student life to marketing—must evolve too. The "identity conversation" is no longer only about preserving tradition; it's about making that tradition intelligible, accessible, and compelling to a broader student population without losing its core.

What this looks like varies: some institutions lean into explicit Catholic identity and formation; others emphasize liberal-arts universality and outcomes first; many are still working out how to balance distinctiveness with openness.

> **At this moment, clarity of mission and alignment between identity and enrollment strategy are not optional—they are essential to long-term viability.**



CULTURAL & SOCIAL CONTEXT

Catholic institutions face a **complex mix of opportunity and constraint.** While enrollment across U.S. higher education has declined by roughly 1.5% annually since 2011, Catholic universities have been uniquely affected, with several closures or mergers in recent years.

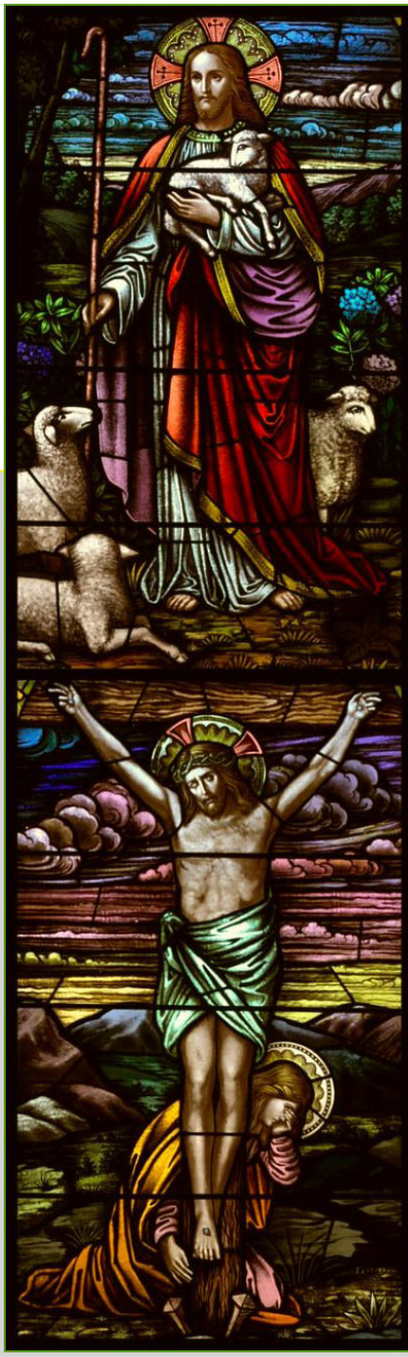
Yet the Catholic sector remains deeply diverse—ranging from large research universities to small liberal arts colleges—and bound by a shared commitment to mission-driven education. Scholars note that while global enrollment in Catholic higher education has grown, U.S. enrollment in non-ecclesiastical studies has declined, underscoring the **need for renewed clarity of purpose** and differentiation in a saturated market.

Research also suggests that while academic reputation, affordability, and outcomes continue to drive student choice, the role of faith is shifting: **only a small portion of students now select a Catholic institution primarily for its religious affiliation, though service learning and values-based education remain strong differentiators.**

This mix of curiosity, openness, and misconception suggests that Catholic institutions have significant opportunity to communicate their missions more clearly—inviting both the faithful and the uncertain into spaces of intellectual inquiry and belonging.

Our social-listening analysis provides a real-time lens on how these dynamics surface in conversation. Across platforms such as Reddit, prospective students discuss Catholic colleges with **curiosity and caution**—some drawn to the opportunity for faith formation, others surprised to find themselves considering a Catholic university because of program quality, scholarships, or location.

Across both groups, one theme consistently emerged: students recognize that each Catholic institution expresses its identity differently and cannot be assessed as a single category. Mandatory theology courses are frequently mentioned in positive terms by both devout and non-religious students, often reframed as **intellectually enriching rather than dogmatic.**



References
1. *Inside Higher Ed* (2024). "A Long Way Down the Demographic Cliff."
2. *The Hetchinger Report* (2025). "The Number of 18-Year-Olds Is about to Drop Sharply, Packing a Wallop for Colleges – and the Economy."
3. Gallup (2024). "US Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided."
4. *Catholic League* (2024). "The State of Catholic Higher Education."
5. *Catholic News Agency* (2024). "Colleges with Strong Catholic Identity See Record Enrollment."
6. *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (2018). "Facts about Ordinands to the Priesthood, the Class of 2018"
7. Cardinal Newman Society Staff, "A Growing Light in the Darkness: Newman Guide Colleges Increase in 2024-25," *Cardinal Newman Society*, October 29, 2024
8. Cardinal Newman Society Staff, "Newman Guide Colleges Are Light in the Darkness"
9. *Cardinal Newman Society* (blog), November 11, 2023

RESEARCH METHOD

To understand how Catholic colleges and universities are navigating the intersection of mission, messaging, and market demand—and to identify which messages most resonate with prospective students and their families—Viv Higher Education and Loper conducted a multi-method study between June and October 2025. Our goal was to illuminate both the narratives institutions share and the perceptions that shape how audiences respond.

Overview of Approach

The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a balanced and actionable understanding of the current landscape.

Website Audit and Enrollment Mapping

We analyzed the websites of 180 Catholic colleges and universities (excluding seminaries and theological schools) across the United States to assess how Catholic identity is presented in their digital communications. Each institution was coded for the prominence, tone, and framing of Catholic identity—ranging from explicitly theological language to values-based or mission-neutral approaches.

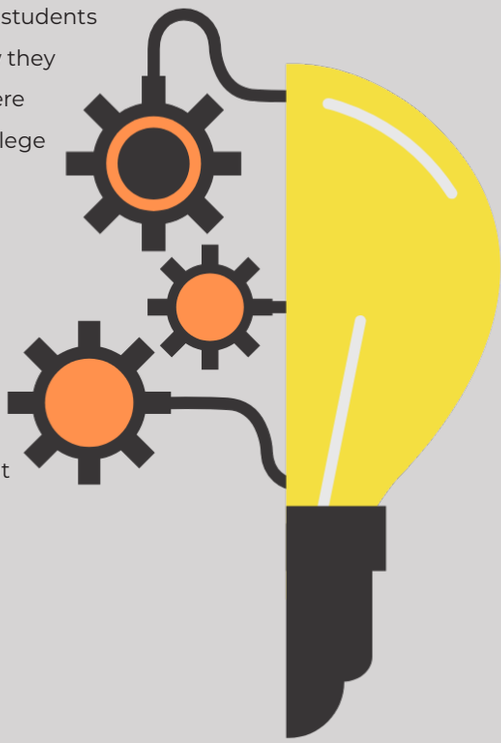
These scores were then mapped against IPEDS enrollment data from 2019–2024 to explore potential relationships between the visibility of mission language and enrollment trends.

Social Listening

To contextualize our findings, we examined both public discourse and existing scholarship on Catholic higher education. Social listening provided insight into how Catholic colleges and universities are perceived and discussed in the broader culture, highlighting prevailing narratives, misconceptions, and emerging areas of interest.

Prospective Student Survey

In collaboration with Loper, a gamified college-readiness platform, we surveyed more than 200 Gen Z and Gen Alpha students across diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and faith backgrounds. The survey explored what students look for in a college experience, which messages and values resonate most strongly, and how they perceive Catholic colleges and universities compared to nonsectarian peers. Respondents were recruited through the Loper app, which reaches more than 100,000 high school and early-college users nationwide.



Presidential Interviews

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with presidents and senior leaders representing a range of Catholic institutions—large and small, coeducational and single-gender, urban and rural, and from multiple sponsoring orders. These conversations explored how leaders define Catholic identity today, how they connect mission to brand and enrollment strategy, and what tensions or opportunities they see shaping their institutions' next decade. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded to identify recurring patterns and distinctive viewpoints.

Integration of Findings

The power of this study lies in the convergence of data. Quantitative sources—such as IPEDS data, survey responses, and social metrics—revealed broad patterns and correlations. Qualitative inputs, including leader interviews and website analysis, provided the language, nuance, and lived perspective behind those patterns. Together, these data sets create a holistic picture of how mission language and market dynamics intersect—and where alignment or dissonance may be shaping enrollment outcomes.

The sections that follow, summarize what we discovered across these data sources.

FINDINGS

Website Audit and Enrollment Mapping: Mission Visibility vs. Market Performance

Our analysis of 180 Catholic college websites focused on how explicitly they presented their Catholic identity on their homepage and in their logo. We defined emphasis on Catholic identity by features such as a prominent mention of their Catholic identity or religious order on the homepage.

Specifically, 60 schools clearly and explicitly conveyed their Catholic identity or religious order in a prominent, above-the-scroll position on their website. Another 65 institutions included an explicit symbol or text representing Catholic identity or religious order, such as a cross or a Saint's name, in their logo. Only 21 schools emphasized their Catholic identity in both their logo and homepage content.

Conversely, 49 institutions had no visible explicit Catholic or religious order references in their logo, while 53 made no mention or implication of Catholic or religious order identity on their homepage. A smaller subset of 12 institutions lacked visible references in both their logo and homepage content.

:: WEBSITE AUDIT ::

33%
PROMINENTLY DISPLAY CATHOLIC IDENTITY ON THEIR HOMEPAGE

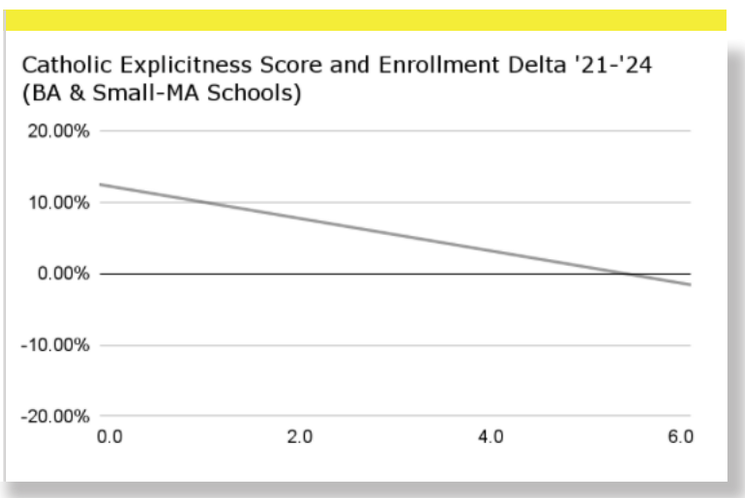
36%
USE CATHOLIC SYMBOLISM IN THEIR LOGO

29%
HAVE NO CATHOLIC IDENTITY MENTION ON THE HOMEPAGE

The majority of institutions, however, fall somewhere in the middle. They tend to weave mission- and values-based language into their homepages rather than leading with overtly Catholic language. This approach might be a deliberate strategy to communicate faith-informed ideals while maintaining broader appeal or signaling a more inclusive identity.

We compared a composite logo and homepage Catholic explicitness score to IPEDS enrollment changes over the past four years. While no correlation was found between these scores and enrollment changes across all schools, a significant negative correlation was observed between scores and enrollment changes at BA and small MA schools.

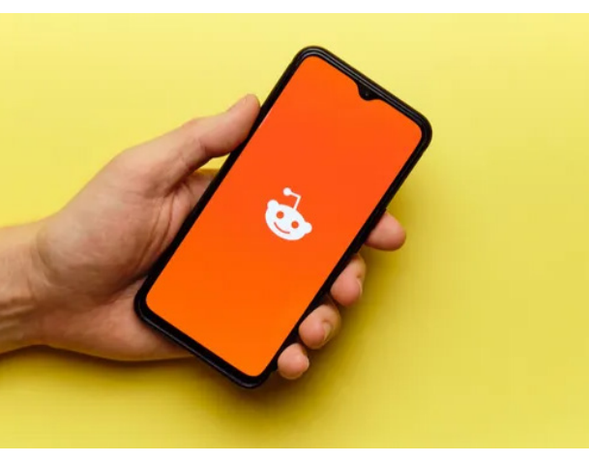
Overall, the data indicates that while a small number of institutions explicitly foreground their Catholic identity, most opt for a balanced approach, using subtle cues to express it implicitly. Nationally, these schools may be experiencing a penalty for overtly portraying their Catholic identities. The subsequent analyses will delve into specific messaging types that might be less appealing to students who are unreceptive to explicit Catholic identity messaging.



SOCIAL LISTENING

Prospective students are using Reddit to explore Catholic universities, revealing two distinct groups: those actively seeking a faith-based experience and those cautiously considering a Catholic institution despite initial reservations. A common theme emerging from Reddit discussions is that "each Catholic institution is different," highlighting a widespread understanding of the diverse ways Catholic universities express their shared mission.

Both groups frequently inquire about mandatory theology courses. Students seeking a Catholic experience want to know if these courses will deepen their faith, while those with reservations worry about conversion efforts. Interestingly, Reddit users consistently reassure both groups that theology courses offer an "edifying experience," regardless of their initial perspective. This suggests an opportunity for Catholic universities to lead marketing efforts by highlighting positive experiences in these courses, as they appear to satisfy the diverse needs of both student segments.



These observations shaped the structure of our survey-based inquiry. The survey compares students from Catholic and non-Catholic backgrounds, examining their college search priorities, their responses to various messages, and their perceptions of how colleges present themselves.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENT SURVEY: THE MESSAGING GAP

We collected 216 responses from prospective undergraduates in a SurveyMonkey instrument distributed via the Loper college search app. Of these students, 31% said Catholic faith plays no role in their lives, 46% said it is slightly or somewhat relevant, and 24% said it is very or extremely important. Furthermore, 16% said they are not open to attending a Catholic school, 54% said they are slightly or somewhat open, and 30% said they are very open. While these numbers do not necessarily mirror national demographics, it's useful to have a large percentage open to Catholic schools and roughly even groups of Catholic backgrounds so that we can compare them. These findings should not be taken as "what percent of Catholic student think that" but rather "what is the difference between the rates at which Catholic and non-Catholic students think that."

WE ASKED PARTICIPANTS ABOUT THREE MARKETING-RELEVANT TOPICS:

- Their priorities in their college search
- Their preferences for specific marketing messages
- Their perceptions about how Catholic schools communicate about themselves

We also surveyed internal marketing professionals at Catholic universities, and asked them how they think typical students would rate questions 2 and 3.

We are interested in two different comparisons; first, the differences in perceptions between Catholic and non-Catholic students, and second the differences in student perceptions and institutional marketers' perceptions.

:: RELIGIOUS SELF-IDENTIFICATION ::

31%
SAY CATHOLIC FAITH PLAYS NO ROLE IN THEIR LIVES

46%
SAY FAITH IS SLIGHTLY OR SOMEWHAT RELEVANT

24%
SAY FAITH IS VERY OR EXTREMELY IMPORTANT IN THEIR LIVES

:: OPENNESS TO ATTENDING A CATHOLIC INSTITUTION::

16%
ARE NOT OPEN TO IT

54%
SLIGHTLY OR SOMEWHAT OPEN TO IT

30%
VERY OPEN TO IT

College Search Priorities

This section examines college search priorities through two distinct lenses to understand how different student segments approach their higher education decisions. First, we compare the priorities of **students who are interested in attending a Catholic college** (regardless of their personal religious background) with those who would not consider a Catholic school. Second, we analyze the differences in priorities between **students who identify as Catholic** and those who do not. *The following tables detail how these groups prioritize various factors (on scales of 0 "Not at All Important" to 4 "Extremely Important") during their college search.*

Interest in Attending Catholic Institutions

Interestingly, both groups assigned similarly low importance to the "Institution's Catholic Identity and Mission." This suggests that the appeal of Catholic schools lies not in their Catholic identity per se, but in the opportunities they offer for community and faith development. Consequently, students who are not interested in attending Catholic schools may not be averse to them due to their Catholicism, but rather because the schools' perceived strengths do not align with their preferences. Practically, this implies that marketing efforts highlighting these specific features could effectively attract a distinct segment of students.

College Search Factor	Not Open to Catholic School	Open to Catholic School	Full Sample
Career Outcomes	3.7	3.8	3.7
Academic Programs	3.3	3.6	3.5
Location	3.4	3.5	3.5
Community and Belonging	**3.0**	**3.6**	3.3
Cost and Affordability	3.2	3.4	3.3
Institution's Catholic Identity and Mission	3.0	3.2	3.0
Faith and Spirituality	**2.6**	**3.1**	3.0

Personal Catholicism

Catholic students rated the importance of Faith/Spirituality significantly higher than their non-Catholic peers, but it was still the lowest priority for that group. Non-Catholic students rated this as very low importance.

By contrast, the importance of the "Institution's Catholic Identity and Mission" was similarly very low for non-Catholic students, but among Catholic students, it was about the same importance as "Cost/affordability," "Location," and "Community & Belonging."

Taken together, these findings suggest that messaging about "Faith and Spirituality" alone might not be specially appealing or unappealing to either Catholic or non-Catholic groups, but messages about the "Institution's Catholic Identity and Mission" are important to the Catholic student community.

College Search Factor	Non-Catholic	Catholic	Full Sample
Career Outcomes	3.8	3.6	3.7
Academic Programs	3.7	3.5	3.5
Location	3.5	3.3	3.5
Community & Belonging	3.4	3.4	3.3
Cost/affordability	3.1	3.4	3.3
Institution's Catholic Identity and Mission	**2.7**	**3.3**	3.0
Faith/Spirituality	**2.8**	**3.2**	3.0

College Search Priorities Findings

The data reveals a striking dichotomy: what draws students to Catholic institutions is fundamentally different from what distinguishes Catholic students themselves. Students interested in Catholic schools aren't primarily swayed by the explicit 'Catholic' label, but rather by the unique strengths and opportunities these institutions powerfully offer. In stark contrast, Catholic students are demonstrably more invested in the institution's Catholic identity than their non-Catholic peers. Yet, across both comparisons, while 'Faith and Spirituality' does divide students, it surprisingly remains the least influential factor for all student groups.

Marketing Message Preferences

Message Design

To assess preferences for marketing messages, we developed messages centered around prevalent themes commonly integrated into college marketing campaigns. These themes were carefully selected to represent the multifaceted value propositions that educational institutions, particularly those with a Catholic foundation, often highlight. The identified themes include:

- **Community & Belonging:** This theme explores the desire for connection, a supportive environment, and the sense of being part of a larger, cohesive group within the collegiate experience.
- **Service & Social Justice:** This theme focuses on the commitment to serving others, advocating for justice, and contributing positively to society, reflecting a core tenet of many faith-based institutions.
- **Ethical Leadership & Values-Based Education:** This theme emphasizes the development of leaders guided by strong moral principles and an educational framework rooted in enduring values, preparing students to navigate complex ethical challenges.
- **Faith & Spiritual Exploration:** This theme directly addresses the opportunity for students to deepen their spiritual understanding, explore their faith, and grow in their religious identity within a supportive academic setting.
- **Catholic Intellectual Tradition & Purposeful Learning:** This theme highlights the rich history of Catholic thought and its application to academic inquiry, fostering a pursuit of knowledge that is integrated with a broader sense of meaning and purpose.

For each of these distinct themes, we crafted three variations of marketing messages. These variations were designed to systematically evaluate the impact of different levels of explicit Catholic language and secular framing on audience preferences.

The order in which these variations are presented in the subsequent tables is consistent across all themes:

1. **EXPLICITLY CATHOLIC:** This variation directly references Catholicism, using clear and unambiguous language to highlight the institution's Catholic identity and its direct connection to the message theme.

2. **CATHOLIC LANGUAGE WITHOUT EXPLICITLY MENTIONING CATHOLICISM:** This variation employs terminology and concepts often associated with Catholic teachings and values, but without explicitly using the word "Catholic" or direct references to the Church. This approach aims to resonate with individuals familiar with Catholic ethos without necessarily identifying as Catholic.

3. **FULLY SECULAR:** This variation presents the core message theme using entirely secular language, devoid of any religious or faith-based terminology. This approach aims to appeal to a broader audience, emphasizing universal values and benefits that transcend specific religious affiliations.

We anticipated that students with a Catholic background would show greater interest in explicitly Catholic messages. However, our study aimed to investigate how these different audiences respond to messages with implicit Catholic coding.

Participants were presented with sets of three messages and asked to select their favorite from each set. The tables below display the percentage of preference for each message among the three groups: Non-Catholic, Somewhat Catholic, and Very Catholic.

Message Preferences - Community & Belonging

The findings reveal a largely symmetrical pattern in student preferences. Very Catholic students were evenly divided in their liking for explicitly Catholic and implicitly Catholic messages, with a small minority favoring the fully secular message. Non-Catholic students, however, showed a stronger preference for the secular message compared to the Catholic students' preference for explicitly Catholic messages. Somewhat Catholic students largely split the difference, with approximately half preferring the implicitly Catholic message and the remainder evenly divided between explicitly Catholic and secular options.

Topic: community & belonging	NOT CATHOLIC	SOMEWHAT CATHOLIC	VERY CATHOLIC
Community means more than just knowing your classmates. Our Catholic beliefs about the dignity of every person lead us to foster an environment that honors and respects every person. We believe you belong here and are called to care for one another.	**17%**	**23%**	**44%**
You'll be part of a campus that sees every person as worthy of respect. Relationships are central here because we believe your dignity isn't something you earn, it's something you're born with.	**29%**	**48%**	**40%**
You'll find a close-knit, supportive campus where you're never just a number. Small classes and real connections mean you belong from day one.	**53%**	**29%**	**16%**

For message design, the findings regarding "Ethical Leadership & Values-Based Education" suggest a notable tradeoff: explicitly Catholic messaging is disliked by non-Catholic students but liked by Catholic students (including those who are "somewhat Catholic"). This indicates that while there's a segment of students who appreciate direct Catholic references, a broader audience, including many Catholic students, is more receptive to implicitly Catholic or secular framing. Therefore, crafting messages that convey Catholic values without explicit religious terminology can be a more effective strategy to appeal to a wider student population, as students appear to pick up on the underlying Catholic ethos even when it's not explicitly stated.

Message Preferences - Service & Social Justice

Students showed less division based on Catholic background regarding the "Community & Belonging" messages. While a clear preference for explicit Catholic social teaching was observed among some Catholic students (and virtually none among non-Catholic students), approximately half of all student groups favored the implicitly Catholic message. This indicates that explicitly mentioning Catholic social teaching offers minimal benefit for highly Catholic students and could be detrimental to non-Catholic students. Conversely, an implicitly Catholic message resonates equally with non-Catholics and more effectively with Catholics compared to a secular message.

Which version of this message resonates most with you?	NOT CATHOLIC	SOMEWHAT CATHOLIC	VERY CATHOLIC
Guided by Catholic social teaching, you'll be invited to serve others, stand up for justice, and work toward a more compassionate, equitable world.	**2%**	**9%**	**13%**
This is a community that believes action matters. You'll learn that justice isn't just a cause, but a responsibility. Through service, reflection, and advocacy, you'll grow into someone who recognizes the value of every person and the systems that must change to protect them.	**48%**	**52%**	**49%**
You'll have real opportunities to give back through service trips, community partnerships, and campus organizations that help you make a difference to communities and society.	**50%**	**38%**	**38%**

For message design related to "Service & Social Justice," the data suggests that explicitly mentioning Catholic social teaching offers minimal benefit and can even be detrimental to non-Catholic students. Instead, an implicitly Catholic message, which weaves in these values without explicit religious terminology, resonates equally well with non-Catholic students and more effectively with Catholic students compared to a purely secular approach. This indicates that relying on underlying Catholic values of service and justice might be broadly appealing and distinguishing from other institutions values of service and justice might be broadly appealing and distinguishing from other institutions.

Message Preferences - Ethical Leadership & Values-Based Education

While not as pronounced as with "Service & Social Justice," students here also showed roughly equal acceptance of both implicitly Catholic and secular messages. However, there was a significantly larger disparity, with non-Catholic students disliking the Catholic message, and Catholic (or even somewhat Catholic) students liking it. However, no group preferred the Catholic message overall.

There's a notable tradeoff here. Explicitly Catholic messaging is generally disliked by non-Catholic students, while Catholic students (including those "somewhat Catholic") tend to like it. However, no group preferred the explicitly Catholic message

overall. This suggests that while a segment of Catholic students appreciates direct references, a broader audience, including many Catholic students, is more receptive to implicitly Catholic or secular framing. The recommendation is to craft messages that convey Catholic values without explicit religious terminology to appeal to a wider student population.

Which version of this message resonates most with you?	NOT CATHOLIC	SOMEWHAT CATHOLIC	VERY CATHOLIC
A Catholic education forms leaders grounded in truth, justice, and concern for the common good. Here, leadership is about using your gifts for something bigger than yourself.	9%	23%	29%
We believe good leaders lead with values. Through your education, you'll develop a strong moral compass and the confidence to do what's right, not just what's easy.	50%	37%	38%
The world needs more leaders who do the right thing, even when it's hard. You'll develop the skills and the character to lead with confidence and purpose.	41%	40%	33%

Message Preferences - Faith & Spiritual Exploration

Explicitly faith-based messages were largely unappealing to non-Catholic students, which was expected. Interestingly, Catholic students preferred implicitly Catholic messages over explicit ones. Therefore, moving forward, it seems beneficial to focus on implicitly Catholic faith and spirituality language in this message category.

Which version of this message resonates most with you?	NOT CATHOLIC	SOMEWHAT CATHOLIC	VERY CATHOLIC
As a Catholic university, faith isn't imposed here—it's explored. You'll have the space and support to learn about the Catholic tradition, deepen your own beliefs, ask big questions, and grow spiritually, no matter where you're starting from.	12%	26%	29%
You'll explore what it means to live a meaningful life and how belief, doubt, and wonder shape that search. Here, spiritual growth is encouraged, questions are welcomed, and the sacred is seen in everyday life.	28%	42%	42%
College is a time to figure out what you believe and why. You'll have the freedom and support to explore life's big questions in your own way.	60%	33%	29%

This suggests that directly focusing on explicit Catholic faith and spirituality in messaging is less effective than steering towards implicitly Catholic language that allows for faith and spiritual exploration without being overtly prescriptive. This approach is likely to be more broadly appealing and avoid unnecessary tradeoffs, as even Catholic students do not show a strong preference for explicit faith messaging.

Message Preferences - Catholic Intellectual Tradition & Purposeful Learning

Catholic students favored the implicitly Catholic message over the explicitly Catholic one. While a majority of non-Catholic students preferred the secular message, over half still preferred the other two, suggesting this intellectual tradition may resonate with broader, non-Catholic audiences.

Which version of this message resonates most with you?	NOT CATHOLIC	SOMEWHAT CATHOLIC	VERY CATHOLIC
Rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition, your education will engage both faith and reason. You'll be encouraged to ask enduring questions and pursue truth with purpose. We believe removing faith from inquiry means missing part of what makes us human.	**10%**	**19%**	**33%**
Learning isn't just about answers. It's about the courage to ask enduring questions. Here, you'll study in a tradition that values both rigorous thinking and moral purpose. Because truth matters, and so does how you use it.	**43%**	**38%**	**40%**
Here, you'll think big and learn with purpose. Your education goes beyond skills. It helps you connect ideas, reflect on meaning, and grow as a thinker and a person.	**47%**	**43%**	**27%**

Message Preferences - Summary

Overall, the study indicates a consistent pattern: **implicitly Catholic messaging tends to be more broadly appealing than explicitly Catholic messaging, even among Catholic students.** While explicitly Catholic language might resonate with a small segment of very Catholic students, it often alienates non-Catholic students and doesn't significantly outperform implicitly Catholic messages even with Catholic audiences. The data suggests that students, including those who are Catholic, often pick up on underlying Catholic values and ethos even when not explicitly stated.

For themes like "Ethical Leadership & Values-Based Education" and "Faith & Spiritual Exploration," there's a **higher tradeoff.** Explicitly Catholic messages are often unappealing to non-Catholic students, and even Catholic students show a preference for implicitly Catholic framing. These require an intentional choice about explicit Catholic terminology versus conveying Catholic values through more universal, implicitly Catholic language to broaden appeal and minimize alienation.

For themes such as "Community & Belonging," "Service & Social Justice," and "Catholic Intellectual Tradition & Purposeful Learning," implicitly Catholic messaging is broadly accepted with less tradeoff. In these areas, explicitly mentioning Catholic concepts offers minimal benefit. The most effective strategy is to weave in underlying Catholic values and ethos using inclusive, values-based language that resonates equally well with non-Catholic students and more effectively with Catholic students compared to purely secular or overtly religious approaches.



The key takeaway for marketing message design is to translate Catholic charisms into accessible, values-based language that resonates universally, allowing the underlying Catholic ethos to be perceived without alienating broader audiences through explicit religious terminology. This approach maximizes appeal and avoids unnecessary tradeoffs across diverse student populations.

Marketing Behaviors

Survey Design

A key question for Catholic school marketers is how the presentation of the institution impacts various audiences. Specifically, what are the drawbacks of highlighting the institution's Catholic identity to non-Catholics, and conversely, what are the drawbacks of downplaying it for Catholic students?

TO MEASURE THIS WE ASKED FOUR QUESTIONS

1. When a Catholic college or university strongly EMPHASIZES its Catholic identity, how does that affect your INTEREST in the the school?
2. When a Catholic college or university strongly DOWNPLAYS its Catholic identity, how does that affect your INTEREST in the the school?
3. When a Catholic college or university strongly EMPHASIZES its Catholic identity, how does that affect the APPEAL of the school as a college choice?
4. When a Catholic college or university strongly DOWNPLAYS its Catholic identity, how does that affect the APPEAL of the school as a college choice?

Marketing Behaviors - Emphasizing

The perception of Catholic identity within educational institutions presents a significant dichotomy between secular and Catholic students, as revealed by recent studies. Among students who do not identify as Catholic, a substantial two-thirds (66.7%) reported that an emphasis on Catholic identity actively reduces their interest in the school. Notably, not a single secular student indicated that such an emphasis increased their interest. This suggests that for a majority of non-Catholic students, the overt promotion of religious affiliation acts as a deterrent, potentially signaling a less inclusive environment or a curriculum that may not align with their personal beliefs.

In stark contrast, Catholic students exhibit a more nuanced and varied response. While a little less than half (approximately 45-49%) of Catholic students stated that emphasizing Catholic identity increases their interest in the school, a significant minority of 22% indicated that it actually decreases their interest. This suggests that even within the Catholic student population, the approach to presenting Catholic identity is crucial. This complexity highlights the need for a balanced and thoughtful approach to integrating and communicating Catholic identity, one that can resonate positively with its intended audience while minimizing potential negative impacts on all student demographics.

	Interest			Appeal		
	Not Catholic	Somewhat Catholic	Very Catholic	Not Catholic	Somewhat Catholic	Very Catholic
Greatly Reduces Interest/Appeal	31%	12%	4%	26%	8%	7%
Somewhat Reduces	33%	30%	18%	24%	28%	7%
Neutral	36%	40%	31%	45%	40%	36%
Somewhat Increases		17%	27%	3%	22%	33%
Greatly Increases Interest/Appeal		1%	20%	2%	2%	18%



Marketing Behaviors - Downplaying

For secular students, minimizing a Catholic institution's identity reduces interest and appeal in less than one-third of students, has no impact on slightly less than half, and increases interest in just under one-quarter. This indicates that the negative impact of downplaying Catholic identity is significantly less for secular students than the negative impact of emphasizing it.

Conversely, for very Catholic students, downplaying a Catholic institution's identity has a similar negative impact to emphasizing it among secular students. Approximately 60% of very Catholic students reported decreased interest and attraction when an institution minimizes its Catholic identity. About one-third of somewhat Catholic students shared this sentiment.

	Interest			Appeal		
	Not Catholic	Somewhat Catholic	Very Catholic	Not Catholic	Somewhat Catholic	Very Catholic
Greatly Reduces Interest	12%	8%	16%	17%	6%	20%
Somewhat Reduces Interest	17%	28%	38%	14%	28%	40%
Neutral	47%	49%	36%	47%	44%	22%
Somewhat Increases Interest	21%	12%	11%	21%	16%	13%
Greatly Increases Interest	3%	3%		2%	6%	4%

Marketing Behaviors: Summary

Our conclusion is that the penalty for downplaying Catholic identity among Catholic students is smaller than the penalty for emphasizing it among non-Catholic students, but that is primarily because students who identify as weakly Catholic-affiliated tended to answer more like non-Catholic students. However, roughly 60% of non-Catholic students and 60% of very Catholic students reported decreased appeal when Catholic identity was emphasized or downplayed, respectively.

This highlights a symmetrical challenge, where the choice of messaging depends on the target market segment. This leaves college marketers with the crucial task of understanding the population of Catholic and non-Catholic prospective students in their market contexts, making predictions about how these students will respond to marketing messages, and aligning institutional mission and character authentically with final messaging strategy.

PRESIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS: LEADERSHIP NARRATIVES

Conversations with more than twenty presidents and senior leaders revealed a common determination: to advance Catholic higher education by connecting *authentic mission* with *strategic growth*. While institutional contexts differ widely, seven consistent themes emerged across the sector.

Mission as Presence, Not Policy

- Leaders described moving beyond statements of faith toward a **culture of lived mission**—where Catholic identity is expressed through relationships, service, and community life.
- Mission is increasingly framed as an *ethos of presence:* how leaders show up, how faculty teach, and how staff interact with students.

- Several institutions have developed **shared language or "service standards"** rooted in Catholic values (respect, care, belonging) to ensure consistency across admissions, academics, and operations.

Confidence in Catholic Identity

- The 20 presidents we interviewed across a diverse set of institutions unanimously rejected a past tendency to "soften" Catholic branding for fear of alienating prospective students.
- Many emphasized the need for **confident, invitational Catholicism**—grounded in intellectual rigor and moral formation, not ideology.
- Confidence, they noted, is not triumphalism but clarity: knowing who you are, what you offer, and why it matters in today's divided world. This involves being able to convey a clear message to prospective student and parent audiences.

Inclusivity Through Catholic Social Teaching

- Diversity and inclusion are being reframed through the lens of **human dignity and solidarity**, drawing directly from Catholic social teaching.
- Institutions are replacing secular DEI language with frameworks like *human flourishing, integral ecology, or radical hospitality*—anchoring inclusion in mission rather than politics.
- This reframing has helped defuse polarization and rebuild unity around shared values.

From Charism to Continuity

- With fewer vowed religious on campus, leaders are focused on **formation for lay faculty and staff** to sustain founding charisms.
- Many are investing in mission offices or leadership retreats to ensure continuity of identity and deepen understanding of Catholic intellectual tradition.
- One president summarized it as: "*Mission formation must become everyone's job description.*"

Catholic Social Teaching as Differentiation

- Leaders see Catholic social teaching—particularly **the call to serve the common good, affirm human dignity, and uphold justice**—as a competitive differentiator.
- Service learning, health care programs, and teacher-preparation programs were cited as natural bridges between faith and workforce relevance.
- The challenge is translation: how to express these commitments in ways that resonate with families seeking **outcomes and ROI,** not just ideals.

Dialogue in a Polarized Culture

- Many presidents view Catholic liberal arts education as uniquely positioned to model **respectful dialogue across differences.**
- Institutions are integrating "constructive dialogue" programs and partnerships focused on civic preparedness and moral reasoning.
- Several described this as the most urgent expression of mission in today's world—teaching students to listen, reason, and lead with empathy.

Growth Through Authenticity

- None saw mission and growth as mutually exclusive. Instead, they described **mission as the engine of sustainability.**
- The phrase *"no margin, no mission"* surfaced repeatedly, underscoring the need for fiscal health as a moral responsibility.
- Many perceive that institutions that lead with authentic identity—clearly articulated, visibly lived—are seeing enrollment gains and stronger community trust.
- As one president put it: "*We grow not despite our mission, but because of it.*"

Catholic higher education's path forward depends less on redefining identity and more on living it visibly and coherently. Presidents agree that clarity, formation, and courage—not consensus—will determine which institutions thrive.

LEADERSHIP CALL-OUT QUOTES

"We don't grow in spite of our mission—we grow because of it."

"Mission isn't a statement on a wall; it's how people feel when they walk through our doors."

"Our Catholic identity isn't something to manage around—it's the very thing that makes us relevant."

"Students aren't turned off by faith; they're turned off by jargon. When we speak about purpose, they listen."

"Formation used to happen naturally when religious were present. Now it must happen intentionally, every day, for everyone."

"We have to stop apologizing for who we are. Catholic education at its best is radically inclusive."

"Our role is to create a space where young people can wrestle with questions of meaning without fear of judgment."

"Mission and margin are not separate conversations. Stewardship is a moral responsibility."

"Catholic social teaching gives us a language of human dignity that transcends politics."

"Our tradition calls us to dialogue, not division. That's our witness in this cultural moment."

Synthesis of Insights Across Data Sources

Across every dimension of this study—the website audit, prospective student survey, presidential interviews, social listening, and literature review—one conclusion emerged clearly: **mission and growth are not opposites. They are interdependent.**

Catholic colleges and universities that lead with authenticity, clarity, and courage are proving that **mission can be a source of competitive advantage.** The most successful institutions are not diluting their Catholic identity to attract new audiences; they are translating it—turning founding charisms into universal values and outcomes that resonate with students and families across belief systems.

Students are drawn to colleges that help them connect learning with meaning. They want to be part of communities that nurture belonging, dialogue, and ethical growth. Catholic higher education—when communicated clearly—offers precisely that. Its intellectual tradition invites discernment, moral imagination, and a lifelong sense of purpose.

In this sense, Catholic education stands as a counterpoint to cultural fragmentation. It offers a model of wholeness: rigorous academics integrated with a vision of the good life, service grounded in solidarity, and leadership formed through reflection. As one leader put it, "Our mission doesn't constrain us—it frees us to be who we truly are."

RECOMMENDATIONS *based on the findings*

While each institution must chart its own path, the data suggest several practical actions Catholic colleges and universities can take to align mission, messaging, and market strength.

1. Align Mission and Market Strategy

- Treat mission as a **strategic asset,** not a heritage statement.
- Embed mission outcomes—such as moral reasoning, community engagement, and discernment—into marketing, enrollment, and academic planning metrics in a way that is easy to understand and embrace by prospective and current students and their families.
- Create cross-functional teams (mission, enrollment, advancement) to ensure coherence between internal formation and external communication.

2. Conduct Market Research & Evolve Messaging Frameworks

- Translate Catholic values into **accessible, inclusive language** that connects with students' aspirations for purpose, belonging, and impact.Test messages with prospective and current students and their parents.
- Lead with shared outcomes ("forming ethical leaders," "preparing students to serve and lead") before introducing theological framing.
- Use storytelling—student profiles, alumni impact, faculty voice—to **show how mission is lived,** not just stated.

3. Build Internal Consensus and Capacity

- Invest in ongoing **mission formation** for faculty, staff, and board members, ensuring all understand how mission informs daily decisions.
- Develop a **shared vocabulary** rooted in Catholic social teaching (a care for the common good, human dignity, solidarity, stewardship) that departments can adapt for their audiences.
- Empower marketing and enrollment teams to serve as interpreters of mission—translating internal language into public relevance.

Looking Ahead

The institutions that will thrive in the next decade are those that integrate the contemplative and the practical—leading with reflection and executing with discipline. **Catholic higher education's path forward lies in the confident translation of mission into modern relevance: faith expressed through excellence, inclusion, and hope**.

ABOUT THE *Study Partners & Next Steps*

Suzan Brinker, Ph.D.
Founder & CEO, Viv Higher Ed.



Suzan Brinker is the Co-founder and CEO of Viv Higher Education, a strategy and enrollment firm serving mission-driven colleges and universities across the country. Before launching Viv, she led in-house marketing teams at Penn State and Northeastern University and served as Chief Marketing Officer at Assumption University. Her experience is rooted in higher education marketing, enrollment strategy, and brand positioning, shaped in part by a deep appreciation for the Catholic intellectual tradition formed during her studies at St. Norbert College and Marquette University.

Kate Jackson-Meyer, Ph.D.
Senior Consultant



Kate Jackson-Meyer is a Catholic theologian and Research Associate at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University. She has a keen interest in helping Catholic institutions strengthen their market position while remaining rooted in their core values in a rapidly changing world. Her research focuses on flourishing communities, forgiveness, moral decision-making, and public theology. She holds a PhD in Theological Ethics from Boston College, a Master of Arts in Religion (Ethics) from Yale Divinity School, and a BA in Biology and Religion from the University of Southern California.

Eric Menna
Co-Founder of Loper



Eric is the co-founder of Loper, a gamified college readiness platform for Gen Alpha and Gen Z. After spending the first years of his career at Bain & Company, Eric started Loper with his college classmate after seeing the issues students had in college readiness during virtual instruction in COVID while working with a charter district in Missouri. Today, Eric leads all of Loper's partnership efforts with colleges, universities, and alternative pathways throughout the country that leverage Loper to build mission-aligned classes. He has spoken at conferences around the country such as NACCAP, NACAC, and more on the benefits of gamification and interactive engagement for college-bound students.

Allison Turcio, EdD
Senior Consultant



Allison Turcio, is Dean of Enrollment and Marketing at Siena College, a marketing professor, consultant, host of The Application Podcast, and publisher of the Higher Education Marketer's Digest. Allison frequently presents at industry conferences and serves on the Editorial Board for the Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing. She has led her team to win several accolades, including AMA's 2023 Emerging Marketer in Higher Education Award. Allison has been selected for Albany Business Review's 40 Under 40 and Siena's Excellence in Administration award. She holds a doctorate degree in higher education leadership from Northeastern University, a master's in communications and a bachelor's in English.

Dave Brinker
Business Intelligence Manager



Dave Brinker is a social scientist with expertise in data analysis, strategic planning, and evaluation. Passionate about turning research into actionable insights, he supports Viv's operational and analytical frameworks. For the Catholic Identity and Enrollment study, Dave led the data modeling and analysis, ensuring the findings provided clear, evidence-based guidance for institutions working to align mission, messaging, and enrollment outcomes. He brings a systems-level perspective to every project, connecting qualitative insights with quantitative rigor. Dave's thoughtful approach helps translate complex data into strategies that advance institutional goals and mission clarity.

Let's continue the conversation!

Every Catholic institution faces its own version of the mission-and-growth challenge. The data in this study provide broad patterns, but the real insight happens in conversation—when we apply these findings to a specific campus context, mission, and market.

If you'd like to explore what these results mean for your institution, we'd welcome the chance to connect.

Email suzan@vivhied.com to schedule a conversation about aligning your mission, messaging, and enrollment strategy.

TURNING *Insights into Action*

THREE PATHS TO MISSION-ALIGNED GROWTH

The *2025 Catholic Identity & Enrollment Study* revealed a clear truth: every Catholic institution faces its own version of the mission-and-growth challenge. The findings are only the beginning. Translating them into action requires campus-specific insight, strategy, and experimentation.

Viv Higher Education and Loper offer three tailored options to help your institution apply the study's findings, connect mission and market, and advance enrollment goals.

TIER 1 — MISSION & MESSAGING DIAGNOSTICS

INVESTMENT: $9,500

A diagnostic that provides actionable insights quickly to institutions seeking a clearer picture of how their mission and

- Competitor audit and messaging scan (3–4 peer institutions)
- Light social listening and sentiment review
- Assessment of your website and digital marketing against Catholic identity best practices
- One-hour consultation with Viv strategists to review insights and next steps

Ideal for: Institutions seeking a diagnostic understanding of how Catholic mission and brand show up in the market—and what small shifts could drive clarity and resonance.

TIER 2 — MISSION-MARKET ALIGNMENT STUDY

INVESTMENT: $24,500

A deeper engagement that combines data and audience testing to translate mission into market strategy.

- All elements of Tier 1
- Customized prospective student message testing through Loper's national network
- Survey of your internal community
- Lead-generation pilot campaign or micro-engagement test developed by Viv's enrollment marketing experts
- Audience sentiment analysis by demographic and belief background
- Half-day virtual strategy workshop with Viv and Loper to develop actionable enrollment and messaging priorities

Ideal for: Institutions ready to test messaging in the market and align internal teams around data-driven insights.

TIER 3 — MISSION-GROWTH STRATEGY LAB

INVESTMENT: CUSTOM (TYPICALLY $50,000 - $85,000)

A comprehensive engagement for institutions ready to build long-term strategy, facilitate cross-campus alignment, and implement mission-driven growth initiatives.

- All elements of Tiers 1 and 2
- Light social listening and sentiment review
- Custom focus groups or expanded surveys with prospective and current students
- Strategic planning facilitation and leadership retreat
- Integration of findings into enrollment, brand, and advancement strategy
- An updated brand framework and brand campaign roadmap for enrollment and advancement

Ideal for: Institutions ready to move from insight to implementation—aligning enrollment, marketing, and mission in a cohesive growth strategy—while defining and activating their Catholic identity as a source of authentic differentiation and sustainable growth.





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