



# Special Report

Placing social science research at the service of the Church in the United States since 1964

Spring 2016

## The Impact of College Experiences on Vocational Discernment

Surveys indicate that most men and women who choose a religious vocation first consider this in their teen years. How does their experience a short time later in college shape their early interest and play a role in their discernment?

This special report presents results from two surveys. The first, a survey of 1,575 men who were in formation or recently ordained priests, was completed in 2012. The second, a survey of 883 women who were new entrants, newly professed, or perpetually professed women religious, was completed in 2015.

In this special report we identify various aspects of the college experience that the respondents tell us were important in their vocational discernment. We find that there are many distinct differences between those who attended Catholic colleges and universities and those who attended other campuses. Foremost, Catholic colleges and universities provide more opportunities for interactions with those who are already living out a vocation as well as more opportunities for discussions of faith and opportunities for formation, worship, and the practice of devotions that respondents tell us were important to them.

### Witnessing Vocations

The likelihood that one knew a priest, sister, or brother while in college depends heavily on the type of campus they attended. As shown in the table here, more than eight in ten men and women religious who attended Catholic colleges or universities had clergy or religious as a professor or campus minister in college. Few of

**HAD A PRIEST, SISTER, OR BROTHER AS A PROFESSOR OR CAMPUS MINISTER BY COLLEGE TYPE**

	CATHOLIC COLLEGES		NON-CATHOLIC COLLEGES	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Professors	88%	83%	18%	8%
Campus ministers	90	84	59	45



those attending other non-Catholic campuses had professors who were clergy or religious. Yet many on non-Catholic campuses did have clergy or religious as campus ministers.

Respondents were asked to describe the influence that clergy and religious on campus had on their vocational discernment. The most common type of response referred in some way to the personal witness of these individuals living out their vocation. Some examples of this type or response include:

- *I had several professors who were sisters and priests. The sisters made me almost envious of what they had. I was attracted by their “normalness” and their joy. They were all amazing! Now I am a member of that congregation and I know that they were a deciding factor.*
- *A Jesuit priest was a mentor, spiritual director, and friend to me in college. He helped give a vocabulary to what I was experiencing and helped me to name the desires moving in my heart. As my spiritual director, he helped me to discern joining the Jesuits.*

- *A Salesian priest taught many of my philosophy classes and it gave me a great example of priestly teaching. I had several monks teach me several courses, and those influenced me to become a monk. I also had a few sisters teach courses, which gave an example of women religious.*
- *Their presence and character inspired me to want to become a religious sister. I was moved by their commitment to the Gospel message and service to the Church and community.*
- *As a person pursuing a degree in biology in college, one of my biology professors who was a priest had a great influence on me. Through his example, I came to understand how God uses the gifts He gives His children.*
- *I thought I had a vocation before I attended college, but various professors and the holy and prayerful way that they studied and taught, made me interested in joining a teaching order specifically.*
- *Only when I look back on it, did I realize there was an impact knowing my college professor was a sister. I had not realized religious women were so educated before.*

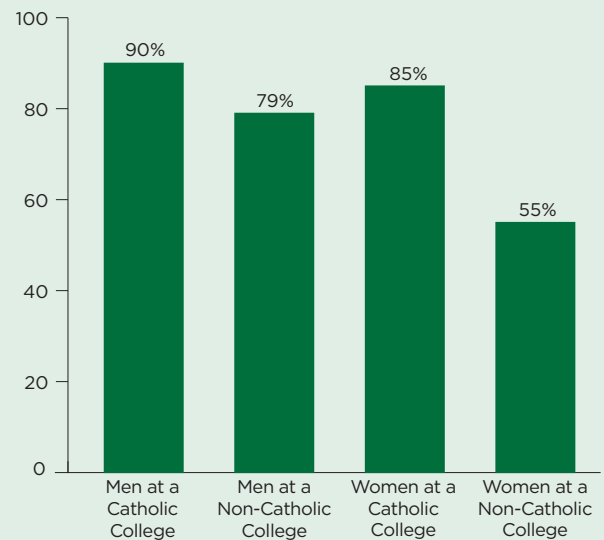
The presence of priests, sisters, and brothers on college campuses is cited as an important factor for those who later chose to follow a vocation in the Church themselves. Results from the studies indicates that declining numbers of clergy and religious in the classroom and within campus ministries would likely have a negative impact on the numbers of men and women discerning a vocation in the future. The larger number of clergy and religious on Catholic campuses also speaks to the importance of these specific institutions in fostering the next generation of vocations. Men and women at Catholic colleges were especially likely to note the positive influence of clergy or religious as their professors rather than as campus ministers.

### Masses, Devotional Practices and Campus Ministry

A majority of respondents indicated attending Mass at least weekly during college. However, this was more common among those attending Catholic colleges and universities. Women attending non-Catholic colleges were least likely to indicate attending Mass weekly or more often. This may be due, however, to Masses being less available on or near their campuses. Only 38 percent of women attending a non-Catholic college reported that Masses were available at a Newman Center on their campus. Half attended Masses at a local parish during college.

Regardless of how often respondents attended Mass during college, about two-thirds or more considered this to be have had at least “some” influence on their vocational discernment. This effect is evident at both Catholic and non-Catholic campuses. CARA research indicates that the typical Catholic college student is much

FIGURE 1. **PERCENTAGE WHO ATTENDED MASS WEEKLY OR MORE OFTEN DURING COLLEGE**



less likely to attend Mass frequently while in college than they did prior to college. Forty-two percent of Catholic students at Catholic colleges report doing so, compared to 31 percent at non-Catholic colleges and universities. The higher frequency of Mass attendance among those who later follow a vocation compared to the broader Catholic student population is likely reflective of the greater religiosity among this population at the time they attend college or university.

Both male and female respondents were more likely to take part in campus ministry and other Catholic programs and activities in college if they were on a Catholic campus. One of the most common experiences is participation in retreats during college, with eight in ten or more of those attending Catholic colleges reporting

### PARTICIPATION IN CAMPUS MINISTRY AND OTHER CATHOLIC PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES DURING COLLEGE

	Percentage reporting participation			
	CATHOLIC COLLEGES		NON-CATHOLIC COLLEGES	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Retreats	80%	86%	59%	63%
Service projects	78	76	63	51
Campus ministry activities and programs	72	76	58	49
Had a spiritual director	62	44	30	24

this experience. For both men and women, the most common type of retreat are two to three day programs—typically on weekends. The most common sponsor for these retreats were campus ministry followed by religious orders. Nearly three in four respondents who attended Catholic colleges also report involvement in service projects and other campus ministry activities and programs. Those attending non-Catholic campuses were less likely to report participation in these.

Sixty-two percent of responding men who attended Catholic colleges said they had a spiritual director during their time on campus. Women on Catholic campuses were less likely to report this (44 percent) as were men and women responding from non-Catholic campuses (30 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

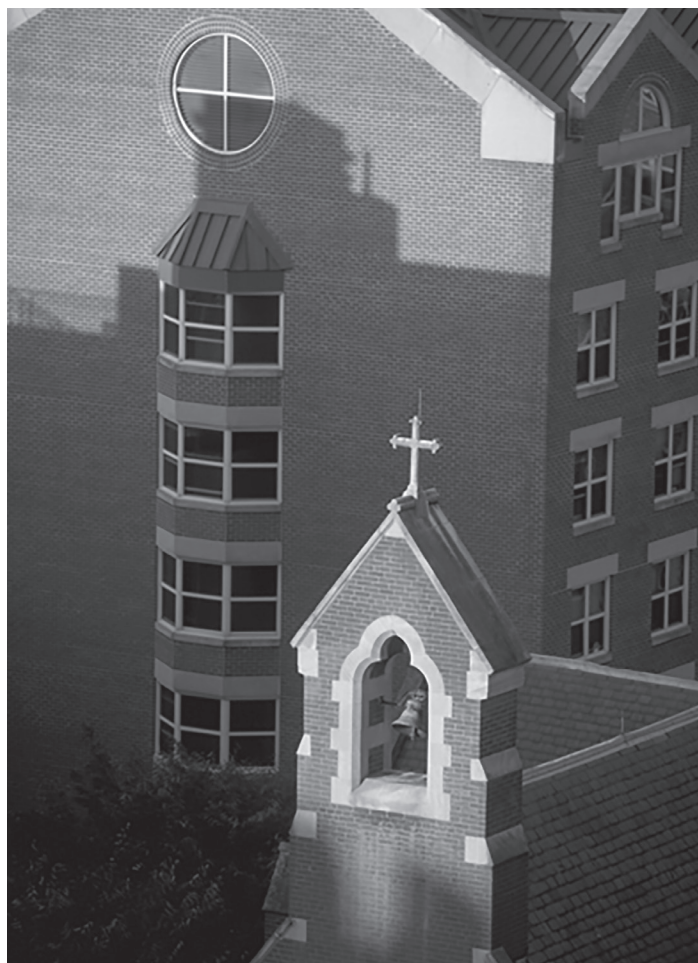
About eight in ten or more of those attending Catholic colleges prayed the rosary and participated in Eucharistic Adoration while they were students. Those attending non-Catholic campuses were less likely to do so. Many at Catholic campuses also prayed the Liturgy of the Hours while fewer than half of those attending college elsewhere did so. About half of respondents participated in Bible study during college. This practice was just as common at non-Catholic colleges as on Catholic campuses.

**PARTICIPATION IN CAMPUS MINISTRY AND OTHER CATHOLIC PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES DURING COLLEGE**

Percentage reporting participation

	CATHOLIC COLLEGES		NON-CATHOLIC COLLEGES	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Rosary	80%	87%	69%	73%
Eucharistic Adoration	79	87	66	67
Liturgy of the Hours	67	71	48	44
Bible Study	51	50	57	51

Of these devotional practices, Eucharistic Adoration had the most influence on vocational discernment. Seventy-three percent of women at Catholic colleges said this had “very much” influence on their vocational discernment, as did 54 percent of women at non-Catholic colleges. Not as many men at Catholic colleges placed the same influence on Eucharistic Adoration. Some 54 percent said it had “very much” influence on their discernment, compared to 51 percent of men attending non-Catholic colleges, responded as such. Significantly fewer, regardless of the type of college they attended, said that other devotional practices had “very much” influence on their vocational discernment.



**Classes**

Respondents were most likely to say they “frequently” discussed faith, religion, or prayer with other students outside of class during college. Majorities of men (62 percent) and women (56 percent) attending Catholic college reported this. Frequent discussion was less common among men (40 percent) who attended non-Catholic campuses and significantly less likely among women there (17 percent).

Many men and women who attended Catholic colleges also report frequent faith discussions in class (51 percent and 41 percent, respectively). Fewer men and women attending other campuses report this (11 percent and 3 percent, respectively). Forty-three percent of men who attended Catholic colleges also report frequent discussions about faith, religion, or prayer with professors outside of class. Women attending Catholic colleges are significantly less likely to report this (18 percent). Less than one in ten men and women attending non-Catholic colleges report frequent discussions about faith, religion, or prayer with faculty outside of class (9 percent and 2 percent, respectively).

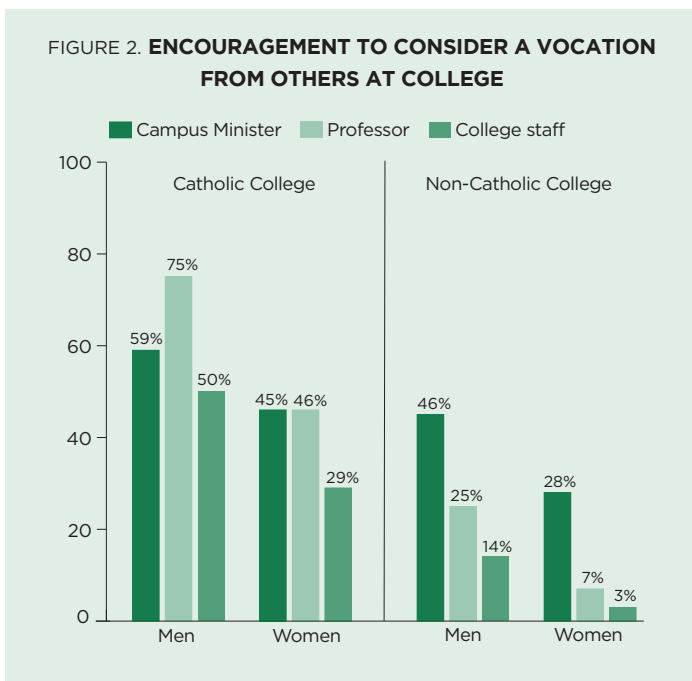
**DISCUSSION OF FAITH, RELIGION, OR PRAYER  
DURING COLLEGE**

Percentage reporting “frequently” discussing

	CATHOLIC COLLEGES		NON-CATHOLIC COLLEGES	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Retreats</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>63%</b>
With other students outside of class	62%	56%	40%	17%
In class	51	41	11	3
With professors outside of class	43	18	9	2

Men who attended a Catholic college were most likely to receive encouragement to pursue a vocation from campus ministers, faculty, and college staff. More than seven in ten indicate that a professor encouraged them. Half or more say a campus minister (59 percent) or college staff (50 percent) encouraged them to pursue a vocation. Minorities of women at Catholic colleges and minorities of both men and women at non-Catholic colleges report receiving encouragement from campus ministers, professors, or other college staff.

Regardless of the type of college they attended, very few report receiving any discouragement from campus ministers, professors,



or other college staff. About one in ten or fewer report discouragement from these individuals, with professors being the most likely to discourage.

**How College Motivated Pursuing a Vocations**

Respondents were asked an open-ended question, “During college, what kept you motivated in pursuing a vocation to religious life?”

Among men, the most frequent comments center on their personal prayer life, the example of a priest and/or religious, a sense of being called by God, a desire to serve God, the encouragement of friends, and their participation in the Mass. Here is a sampling of their responses:

- *Ultimately, the feeling in my heart that the priesthood was where I was to go. It kept resurfacing and I came to a point where I could not ignore it.*
- *Good priests and nuns that lived out their vocation with joy and loyalty to the faith and the Church.*
- *Prayer, especially the Mass.*
- *My prayer life and the support of those who know me well.*
- *I was confident this was what God was calling me to do.*
- *The desire to serve others and bring Christ’s love to them.*

Among women, the most frequent comments center on a sense of being called by God, devotional practices, friends and family, as well as the culture and community of their college. Here is a sampling of their responses:

- *I converted to Catholicism as a sophomore in college, and my newfound love for Christ in the sacraments drew me to do whatever he wanted—including religious life!*
- *We were living the Catholic culture at my school. To be honest, I was looking to pursue marriage, but I experienced a lot of restlessness, and realized the Lord was calling me to be his alone.*
- *Frequent personal prayer, especially at Eucharistic Exposition, a very strong Catholic family life, and the kind, encouraging letters I received from the Vocations Directress, all greatly helped me to pursue my vocation.*
- *Regular prayer—recognizing my satisfaction/happiness/strength in that in the midst of regular, sometimes stressful, college living.*
- *I had an incredible scholarship and I loved college, but there was always a nagging question in my mind: “why wait?” For me, it was not a question of if but when. My daily attendance at Mass definitely helped keep me motivated.*
- *I had a very strong group of Catholic friends to push and support me in all areas of my faith. This was also when I began to actually spend time just getting to know some religious sisters and seeing how real they are was helpful.*



- *The support of my friends, professors, and friends who were in religious life, especially young Jesuits who were friends of mine.*
- *The constant array of spiritual activities made available by our campus ministry, from excellent retreats, to activities of all kinds being offered every day (“Supper Seminars,” Adoration, Mass, the Rosary, Bible Studies, Prayer & Praise, etc.) all helped me to pray more openly to the Lord every day and listen for what He had in mind.*

### College Aspects that Discouraged a Vocation

Respondents were asked an open-ended question, “*What discouraged you in pursuing a vocation to religious life?*”

Among men, the most frequent comments focused on the culture and environment of their college campus, other career ambitions or plans, women and dating, the requirement of celibacy, lack of support from family and friends, and the poor example of some priests, religious, and/or seminarians. Some respondents indicate that they were not yet discerning a vocation during their time as an undergraduate, so they report that the question does not apply to them. Some respondents also identify issues facing the Church, including the clergy sex abuse scandal, as having discouraged their vocational discernment. The responses below represent a sampling of comments on these themes:

- *Giving up marriage and giving up other career opportunities that might not be possible as a religious.*
- *The reality, politics, and flaws of the Church. Seeing how the faith was lost by so many.*
- *Celibacy and the sacrifice of not having children.*
- *Nothing in particular; I just wasn’t thinking about it.*
- *The reaction of my family to my decision to enter seminary. They were very upset with me and tried many times to change my mind.*

Among women, the most frequent comments focused on family or friends discouraging them, desires for marriage and family, demands of social life and being a student, and their own fears or self-doubts. Here is a sampling of their responses:

- *What discouraged me the most were the people closest to me who kept discouraging me and telling me that I was too pretty to be a nun or that I would make a much better wife and mother than a Religious Sister. They put a lot of doubt into my heart.*
- *Some of my professors tried to persuade me to get a graduate degree before entering—which tempted my ambition—and I was also afraid that I might be making the wrong life choice in entering religious life.*
- *It was a pretty unknown path. I had some friendships with young men that I could have seen ripening into romance, and the idea of marriage was very attractive to me.*
- *The social life! Most of my friends were dating. None of the girls I knew were considering a vocation.*
- *My own lack of self-worth. I honestly believed I wasn’t good enough or holy enough to be a sister. I had this notion that sisters were/are ultra-holy people who never sin. It was an unrealistic view of both sisters and myself.*
- *Fear of being ridiculed by my family, friends, and peers.*

### College Choice

Among the male respondents, the survey asked about the reasons why they selected the college they attended. Among those who chose a Catholic college or university the top three reasons cited as being “somewhat” or “very” important were the religious affiliation of the college (79 percent), the academic reputation of the college (69 percent), and the location of the college (62 percent). Among those who chose a non-Catholic college the following reasons were considered most important: the location of the college (74 percent), the affordability of the college (73 percent), and the academic reputation of the college (68 percent). Only 7 percent of those choosing a non-Catholic college cited the religious affiliation of that college as being “somewhat” or “very” important. Female respondents were not asked about the context of their college choice.

## Mapping the Path to a Vocation: College in Context

CARA research indicates that the path young Catholics take in developing an interest in a vocation, then discerning and seeking out that vocation out, and finally completing that journey and living out this choice is very complex. College experiences are important but are also only a link in the typical chain of events.

“Only about one in ten young Catholics say they ever considered a vocation.

More often than not, the first consideration occurs in the teen years after a child has been enrolled in Catholic schools and has personally known a priest, brother, or sister. They have also likely been encouraged by someone to consider the vocation.”

About one in ten young Catholics say they have ever considered a vocation (12 percent of males considering priesthood or religious life and 10 percent of females considering religious life). More often than not, the first consideration occurs in the teen years after a child has been enrolled in Catholic schools and has personally known a priest, brother, or sister. They have also likely been encouraged by someone to consider the vocation. They are likely to be a member of a family that attends Mass regularly and is active in their parish beyond these worship services. Activity in parish youth groups also appears to be important.

The average new ordinand or person entering religious life today typically does so in their mid-30s. Many have experience in another career field, often business, education, or health care, before living out the vocation they first imagined in their teens. Between that initial teenage interest and being formed in their vocation in their 30s, lies the college experience. As shown here, it is an important bridge, a support structure that makes the journey to the vocation more probable.

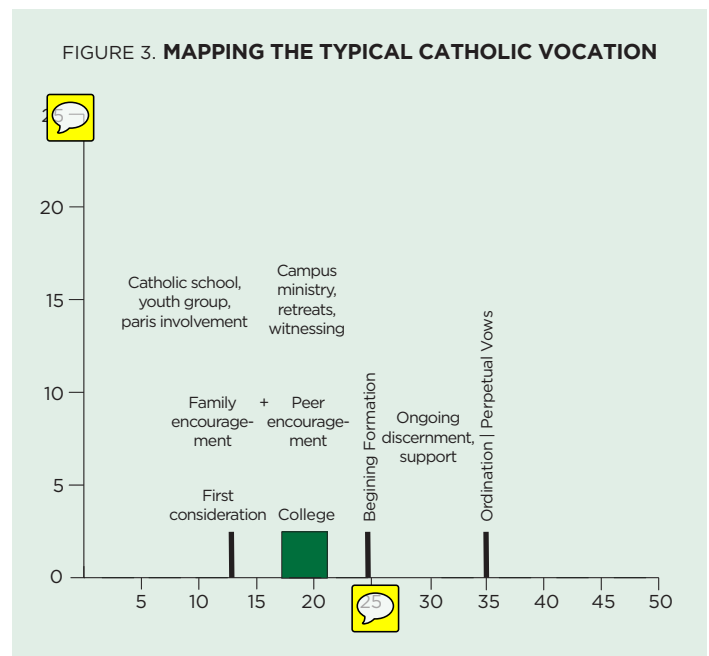
This figure maps the typical experience from early influences to consideration through ordination or final vows. College spans the important years between initial consideration and the beginning of their formation for a vocation. Arguably, college experiences are actually first steps in that formation. Many report on the importance of being able to discuss religious themes in the classroom and outside of it with faculty and other college staff. Discussions

with peers are important as well, but even more essential is the support these peers give when the aspirant expresses their interest in a vocation.

Clearly college retreats, worship, and practice of other devotions during college—often more frequently than their peers—is important as well. Although campus ministries on non-Catholic campuses fulfill many of these aspects well, there appears to be even greater opportunities and support available on Catholic campuses. One of the most important aspects of the college experience for many who later seek a vocation is witnessing the life and work of sisters, brothers, and priests. Spiritual direction during college is also evident as one of the single most important experiences.

Among the questions that are asked of both men and women in the surveys, the college experiences evaluated as being “very important” by those who experienced or participated in them are shown below. Those most likely to be considered as “very important” by participants were spiritual direction, “Come & See” events, Eucharistic Adoration, and Masses. Majorities of men and women participating in each of these recall them as being “very important” for their vocational discernment.

FIGURE 3. MAPPING THE TYPICAL CATHOLIC VOCATION



Other components of the college experience considered important by some who experienced them include: retreats, vocational discernment or support groups, praying the rosary, Liturgy of the Hours, the influence and support of friends, service programs, campus ministry, and Bible study. Note that questions about the influence of discussions with faculty or knowing clergy or religious on campus were

**RANKING OF COLLEGE ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES BY  
LEVEL OF INFLUENCE ON VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT**

Percentage reporting each as “very important”

	<b>MEN</b>	<b>WOMEN</b>	<b>AVERAGE</b>
Spiritual Direction	65%	69%	67%
“Come & See” Events	52%	72%	62%
Eucharistic Adoration	53%	61%	57%
Mass	52%	53%	53%
Retreat Experiences	36%	41%	39%
Vocation Discernment/ Support Group	39%	33%	36%
Rosary	32%	32%	32%
Liturgy of the Hours	37%	22%	30%
Friends	28%	20%	24%
Service Programs	25%	22%	24%
Campus Ministry	23%	23%	23%
Bible Study	23%	10%	17%

not asked in similar enough ways in each survey to be included in the comparison table shown here. Regardless, it is clear that these are recalled by many as very influential as well.

Finally, there is one aspect of the college experience that is preventing some from pursuing their interest in a vocation. In recent years, CARA research has highlighted the impediment of educational debt. Religious institutes receiving inquiries report that about a third of those showing serious interest in religious life have college loans that average more than \$25,000. For some, this level of debt is too high for the order to take on. About a quarter of new diocesan ordinands have educational debt when they enter seminary. On average, this amounts to some \$20,000. It is a challenge for dioceses and religious institutes to manage these debts and in some cases they are unable to do so and the person interested in the vocation is turned away.

The path to a vocation is by no means ensured by the college experience. Many who begin formation end up not being ordained or professing perpetual vows. About half who begin this process do not end up as clergy or vowed religious. Ongoing discernment and support from family, peers and others in Church ministry are essential. Yet without the important college experiences that we now know to be supportive, many would likely never end up in this stage of discernment.

**About The Respondents**

The average age of female respondents to the college experience survey was 37 and the average age for men was 33. Seventy-nine percent of responding women were born in the United States as were 83 percent of the men. Eighty-seven percent of the female respondents entered the faith as an infant as did 89 percent of the men. Nine in ten women had a Catholic mother and 85 percent a Catholic father. Among men, 92 percent had a Catholic mother and 86 percent a Catholic father. Majorities of men and women, 53 percent, graduated from a public high school. Forty-six percent of men attended a Catholic high school compared to 35 percent of women.

**About the Studies**

The survey of men was commissioned by Boston College and the Jesuit Conference-USA in 2011. The survey was designed to assess the role and influence of Catholic colleges and universities on the vocational discernment of men entering the seminary and religious life in the United States. Between April and June 2012, CARA distributed the survey to a total of 5,246 men known and identified by church leaders to be in formation or recently ordained. A total of 1,575 men completed the questionnaire, making it one of the largest recent surveys of men in formation and the newly ordained.

“The survey was designed to assess the role and influence of Catholic colleges and universities on the vocational discernment of men entering the seminary and religious life in the United States.”

The survey of women was made possible through funding provided by from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. In fall 2014, CARA asked major superiors of institutes of women religious in the United States for contact information for entering, newly professed, and recent vocations to their institutes in the United States. These superiors identified 209 new entrants, 114 newly professed, and more than 1,000 perpetually professed women who had entered religious life since 2000. CARA contacted these women and invited them to participate in a survey in January 2015. By March 2015, CARA had received completed surveys from 883 women, for a response rate of approximately 63 percent.

**Thank You**

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### About CARA


CARA is an independent, national, non-profit, Georgetown University-affiliated research center that has more than 50 years of experience conducting social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission:

1. to increase the Church's self-understanding
2. to serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers
3. to advance scholarly research on religion, particularly Catholicism

The CARA staff is composed of professionally trained academic social scientists who have earned graduate degrees. CARA's long-standing policy is to be independent and objective, to let research findings stand on their own, and never take an advocacy position or go into areas outside its social science competence.

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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

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