

March 5, 2003

Catholics Adopt More Liberal Attitudes During College

By TAMAR LEWIN

Most Roman Catholic students, whether in Catholic colleges or nonsectarian ones, start college believing that abortion should be illegal, but by the time they are seniors the majority support legalized abortion, according to a survey described in the March issue of Catholic World Report, a conservative monthly.

Both as freshmen and as seniors, Catholic students at Catholic colleges have more conservative attitudes on abortion, premarital sex and same-sex marriage than those at nonsectarian schools, the survey found. But the proportion adopting more liberal attitudes over the course of their college years is similar at both types of institutions.

As freshmen, 37.9 percent of the Catholic students at Catholic colleges and just under 49.5 percent of the Catholic students at nonsectarian schools said abortion should be legal, while as seniors, 51.7 percent of those at the Catholic colleges and 65.5 percent at nonsectarian colleges said it should be.

Similarly, 27.5 percent of the Catholic freshmen at Catholic colleges and 38.7 percent of the Catholics at nonsectarian schools said premarital sex was "all right" for people who "really like each other." As seniors, though, 48 percent of the Catholic-college students and 59.8 percent of the Catholics at nonsectarian schools took that view.

The numbers are far from definitive, though. The report is based on surveys of thousands of students who were freshmen in 1997 and seniors in 2001, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles — but is not a nationally representative sample of Catholic colleges.

The U.C.L.A. survey includes 38 of the nation's more than 200 Catholic colleges, and even within the institutions surveyed, the findings may be somewhat skewed, since each used its own method for selecting students to poll.

"Highly selective Catholic schools, which tend to be more liberal, were overrepresented in this sample," said William S. Korn, associate director for operations at the U.C.L.A. institute. "If all Catholic colleges had been surveyed, the changes observed would probably be less."

Whatever its flaws, the report provides the first tantalizing data on an issue that has been of serious concern to Catholics: whether, and to what extent, Catholic colleges help bolster students' religious faith and practice. "We would expect Catholic colleges to have a much stronger effect in bringing students closer to Catholic teachings, or at least not having them fall away," said Patrick J. Reilly, the report's author and president of the Cardinal Newman Society, a group dedicated to reinforcing the religious identity of Catholic colleges.

Others point out that students of all faiths, at all types of institutions, tend to become more liberal during their college years — so the changes may be due more to overall societal influences than to anything the college does or does not do.

"Students look at movies, at their friends, at their families, at everything around them, and that doesn't mean Catholic colleges are failing," said Monika Hellwig, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. "The question is whether the task of higher education in our pluralistic, changing society is to lock students into rules — even rules I agree with — or to teach them critical thinking."

Dr. Hellwig said that while her group and the Cardinal Newman Society would generally agree on what values were required for a moral life, they differed on what higher education could or should do to foster those values.

According to the report, 8 percent of the Catholics who went to nonsectarian colleges and 16 percent of those at Catholic colleges said they had much stronger religious beliefs and convictions as seniors than they had as freshmen.

At the Catholic colleges, 58 percent of the Catholic seniors said they attended religious services occasionally or not at all, compared with 32 percent of the Catholic freshman. At the nonsectarian colleges, 78 percent of the Catholic seniors attended religious services occasionally or not at all, compared with 44 percent of the Catholic freshmen.

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)