

ISSUE BULLETIN

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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Catholic Colleges Should Lead Charge Against Sexual Assault

Cardinal Newman Society Position Statement

The news is filled these days with reports of sexual assaults against college students, even at some of the most committed and faithful Catholic colleges.

The numbers are disputed, but it's appalling that even one parent's daughter would suffer such a violation during what should be happy years of growth in college. The victims of these horrible crimes deserve our prayers, compassion and support as well as justice from our legal system.

Moreover, Catholic colleges should be prepared to offer Christian counseling and support for victims. Too often, colleges of all types and sizes have been found ill-equipped or unprepared to address what appears to be a growing problem.

Ultimately—and most importantly—the assaults must be stopped. Off campus, this is largely the responsibility of law enforcement, although a proper moral formation of students at Catholic colleges can help substantially. On campus, colleges bear great responsibility for preventing these crimes from occurring in the first place.

And it is in this respect, that some of America's most faithful Catholic colleges have important lessons to teach the rest of higher education—even most other Catholic colleges.

By preserving traditional norms for student access and behavior in campus dorms, faithful Catholic colleges effectively combat on-campus sexual assault.

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chastity and sobriety in campus
residences helps protect
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Catholic beliefs and identity.
It's a commonsense solution.**

Such policies come naturally for faithful Catholic institutions, because they are firmly rooted in Catholic morality and fulfill the colleges' mission of human formation in the light of Christ.

If only the rest of the nearly 200 Catholic, residential colleges would do the same. Catholic families should demand it. It's long past time that Catholic colleges get on board and set an example of proper campus life, rather than invite the tragic consequences of the secular campus model.

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Real prevention

Focusing on prevention efforts in campus dorms is how colleges can most immediately and effectively have an impact on sexual assault.

Although most sexual assaults against college students occur off campus—where college leaders have no control over the environment or student behavior—a sizable portion, about a third, occur within student dorms. That's where colleges bear direct responsibility for protecting their students.

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According to the federally funded "Campus Sexual Assault Study" (2007), which considered offenses against female students from 2005 to 2007, 28 percent of the assaults that involved the use of physical force and 36 percent of the assaults against an incapacitated (often drunk) victim occurred in campus residences.

For most colleges today, preventing sexual assault means educating students about consent to sexual activity, empowering women to avoid and resist assault, and strengthening disciplinary

and reporting procedures. These are all very important strategies, and every Catholic college should embrace them.

Still, *much more* could be done on campus, where college leaders have the authority to regulate student behavior and the environment. Catholic colleges should be leading by example!

Drinking and the hook-up culture

A campus culture of chastity and sobriety is important to reducing sexual crimes, and Catholic colleges should have the moral courage to make it happen.

Alcohol is strongly associated with sexual assault. A report published in 2000 by the U.S. Department of Justice, “The Sexual Victimization of College Women,” found that “frequently drinking enough to get drunk” was one of the four main factors contributing to sexual assault. And the Justice Department’s 2014 report, “Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization Among College-Age Females, 1995-2013” (2014) found that 47 percent of victims perceived their attacker was drinking or using drugs.

These crimes are also associated with the “hook-up” culture on many campuses. One study, “Some Types of Hookups May Be Riskier Than Others for Campus Sexual Assault” (*Psychological Trauma*, 2016) found that 78 percent of on-campus sexual assaults took place during casual sexual encounters.

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Sex and drunkenness are commonplace on the typical college campus. So, we have two risk factors for sexual assault—drinking and casual sex—occurring frequently in campus dorms.

Even when alcohol is restricted on campus, students may return to their rooms intoxicated from off-campus drinking. Isn’t it common sense that colleges should strive to reduce opportunities for sexual activity in student residences, especially at the times when students are more likely to be drinking?

Sadly, few secular colleges today would attempt any restriction on sexual activity. College leaders, the media, and even many victims’ advocates deem casual sex a rite (and right) of passage for college students. They are therefore limited to prevention strategies that have minimal impact on the dorm environment.

Every college serious about its Catholicity should be eager to protect the bodies and souls of its students.

But Catholic colleges that take their identity and mission seriously should actively and enthusiastically embrace policies that reduce sexual activity in campus residences.

Creating and fostering a culture of chastity and sobriety in campus residences is a commonsense way to create a safe and moral environment. Moreover, it is elemental to a faithful Catholic education.

Catholic colleges especially need to be concerned with more than just sexual assault. Consensual sexual activity is a serious sin that has two victims of their own poor decisions. Every college serious about its Catholicity should be eager to protect the bodies *and* souls of its students.

Step one: single-sex residence halls

A first step toward reducing sexual assault on campus is to designate all dorms single-sex. Coed residence halls have been associated with greater alcohol abuse and sexual activity, as documented by Dr. Chris Kaczor in his 2012 report for The Cardinal Newman Society, “Strategies for Reducing Binge Drinking and a ‘Hook-Up’ Culture on Campus” (available on our website).

A 2009 study in the *Journal of American College Health*, “The Impact of Living in Co-ed Resident Halls on Risk-Taking Among College Students,” found that “students in co-ed housing (12.6%) were more than twice as likely as students in gender-specific housing (4.9%) to indicate that they had had 3 or more sexual partners in the last year.” The study also found a higher likelihood of binge drinking in coed dorms.

And another study, “The Impact of Current Residence and High School Drinking on Alcohol Problems Among College Students” (*Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 2002), found that “students living in coed dormitories, when compared with students in single-gender dorms, incurred more problem consequences related to drinking.”

The vast majority of Catholic colleges resemble their secular counterparts in sponsoring coed dorms—but thankfully, not all do. The Newman Society has identified more than 10 percent of America’s Catholic colleges that have bucked the trend of the past 50 years. Colleges with single-sex residence halls include some of the nation’s most faithful Catholic colleges and even a few that have waffled on their Catholic identity.

Most notable among the latter group is the University of Notre Dame. This is an instructive case, since its students report multiple sexual assaults in the University’s single-sex dorms each year. Notre Dame’s experience indicates that, while single-sex residence halls should be helpful in reducing sexual assault, they are only a first step to building a campus culture of sobriety and chastity.

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Step two: stronger visitation policies

The second step—arguably more important than single-sex dorms—is for colleges to adopt and enforce policies restricting opposite-sex guests in dorm rooms.

Catholic parents understand the effects of temptation and our fallen nature. They know that there is good reason for never letting their teenager have a boyfriend or girlfriend alone in a bedroom. It's what Catholics have long described as a “near occasion of sin.”

... 82 percent of U.S. Catholic colleges allow closed-door visitation until 2 a.m. or later on weekends.... More than a quarter of Catholic colleges have open visitation at *all hours of the night!*

Why do so many Catholic colleges ignore this basic understanding? Don't the high rates of abortions, STDs and sexual assaults among young men and women teach us something about the limits of self-control?

Since most campus residences are little more than bedrooms with a chair and desk, it's common sense that they should be off-limits entirely to opposite-sex visitors.

Instead, 82 percent of U.S. Catholic colleges allow closed-door visitation until 2 a.m. or later

on weekends, and 88 percent allow it until midnight or later on weekdays, according Adam Wilson's 2016 report on visitation policies for The Cardinal Newman Society (available on our website).

More than a quarter of Catholic colleges have open visitation at *all hours of the night!*

Think about that for a moment. What message does it send to students? And what care does it show for helping students remain chaste?

Loose visitation policies indicate low expectations and suggest a college's lack of concern for natural consequences, including sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion, and (have Catholics forgotten?) mortal sin.

And the consequences might also include sexual assault.

The “Campus Sexual Assault Study” found that 52 percent of forced sexual assaults and 90 percent of assaults on incapacitated victims took place between midnight and 6 a.m.—and most others between 6 p.m. and midnight. The later at night, the greater the likelihood of drinking and casual sex, and therefore the greater the danger for students.

Couldn't Catholic colleges, then, restrict opposite-sex visiting hours to the daytime as an immediate intermediary step?

Better still, colleges should protect students by sensibly forbidding opposite-sex guests in campus bedrooms at nearly all times, like many evangelical Christian colleges and a few standout Catholic colleges. These include:

- ✓ Christendom College (Va.)
- ✓ John Paul the Great University (Calif.)
- ✓ Northeast Catholic College (N.H.)
- ✓ Thomas Aquinas College (Calif.)
- ✓ Thomas More College (N.H.), and
- ✓ Wyoming Catholic College. (Wyo.)

Others, like Franciscan University and Ave Maria University, have limited visiting hours and require open doors.

No more excuses

We have discussed these ideas with Catholic college leaders, and one common explanation for allowing opposite-sex visitation and coed dorms is that students need opportunities to socialize. Gathering in dorm rooms has become an accepted and even expected part of the college experience.

The difficulties, then, of building a campus environment that demands chastity and sobriety in campus residences are real enough. But they seem surmountable at a college committed to safety and Catholic morality.

There are also physical plant constraints. Despite all the amenities of the typical campus, most colleges have not created adequate spaces for students to gather outside their private rooms.

Some leaders focus on the link between alcohol and sexual assault, strictly enforcing sobriety on campus while taking a softer approach on sexual activity with messaging that appeals to students' virtue.

Drinking, however, often occurs off campus, with later consequences for on-campus behavior. And relying on students' self-restraint amid a

culture obsessed with sexuality and pornography seems quite risky and naïve.

Some college leaders worry that they'll lose students if opposite-sex visitation isn't allowed.

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Especially for Catholic colleges, protecting students' health and their immortal souls must be the higher priority.

Adopting commonsense student dorm room policies won't stop off-campus sexual assaults, and it won't solve every problem on campus. It doesn't mitigate the responsibility to provide adequate support for victims of assault. But it could help prevent the many assaults that do occur in dorm rooms as a predictable consequence of casual sex and drinking, while upholding the Catholic mission of the college.

It is here that college officials and those concerned with combatting sexual assaults should emulate the commonsense and faithful policies of some of the Newman Guide colleges noted above.

Ten years ago, Pope Benedict told Catholic educators in the U.S. that the crisis of truth is rooted in a crisis of faith.

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Catholic colleges should face the ugly truth that, for many of them, their dorm policies may have the effect of undermining their important faith-filled missions. The fact that this is unintentional—and perhaps even contradicted by other efforts to teach moral behavior—does not make the problems go away.

There is nothing anyone can do to eliminate concupiscence and evil in the world. All the more reason that we believe every Catholic

college should build a campus climate that celebrates chaste, Catholic living. This is what Catholic families should expect from Catholic education.

The Cardinal Newman Society's mission is to promote and defend faithful Catholic education. We believe that families have a right to expect that a Catholic education will uphold Truth in accord with the timeless teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church, so as to prepare young people for this world and for eternity with God in heaven.