

Some Catholic Colleges Go Online While Others Continue in Person

BY STEPHEN BEALE

As schools reopen this fall, some Catholic colleges are shifting to online courses due to the coronavirus pandemic, accelerating a trend toward digital learning even as many institutions remained committed to the value of in-person instruction.

This fall, The Catholic University of America's undergraduate classes will be all online except for freshmen and a few other exceptions.

"I understand this is disappointing news, because it is disappointing to us. But the large and sustained increase in infections nationwide poses a serious risk that we will be unable to provide the care necessary for a full complement of our student population," President John Garvey announced in a July 31 letter to students and their parents.

But Catholic higher education is no stranger to online learning. Catholic Distance University (CDU) has been providing this kind of alternative platform for learning for the past two decades. Several other prominent institutions have established firm footholds in the digital arena, as well, such as Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut, and the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, at the graduate level.

Online Lessons

But now, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, other schools are either venturing online for the first time or expanding their existing digital footprint.

Most of them seem to be doing some hybrid of online and in-person classes. St. Thomas University in Houston, for example, is starting off the semester online and then moving to in-person instruction. St. Louis University has given its students a choice between returning to a campus of reconfigured classrooms and lower-density dorms, or studying completely online.

Loyola University in Chicago is holding a phased reopening mirrored after the city's and Illinois' graduated approached. Currently, classes are online, with classes meet-



HIGHER EDUCATION. A female student prays at an outdoor grotto at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio. This fall, some students are opting for online classes because of COVID-19, as the university launches five new bachelor degrees that will be completely online. Esther Kolis / Shutterstock.com

ing in person only "where instruction cannot be replicated in an online environment." Loyola will resume regular classes only when a vaccine is developed or there is an effective therapeutic treatment for COVID-19.

As more universities make the online move, some students are opting to study at places already experienced in the medium such as CDU. This fall, CDU has seen its enrollment numbers rise. CDU's communications director Mary Kate White said the school's experience "gives us an edge." She also noted that the school was recently accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, which she said handles the accreditations for most Catholic seminaries in North America.

As of Aug. 24, CDU's fall graduate enrollment is up 20% over last fall, while undergraduate numbers increased by 5%. Overall, applications increased 22% this year, according to White.

e-Steubenville

Franciscan University is also extending its digital reach, launching five new bache-

lor degrees this fall that will be completely online. The university had been planning them before COVID-19 hit, but the onset of the pandemic prompted officials to speed up the timeline, according to Joel Recznik, the vice president of enrollment management at the university.

"We made the decision that the best thing we could do to serve students would be to launch these five programs this fall instead of rolling them out over a two- to three-year period," Recznik said.

The five new online undergraduate degrees are Bachelors of Arts in catechetics, psychology, theology and philosophy and a Bachelor of Science in management. The university expects 100 students to be in the new bachelor's programs, which Recznik noted was a positive response, given that they weren't announced until June and that there had been no time to advertise them.

Expanded Horizons

Franciscan University already has a vibrant online graduate program with degrees in theology, catechetics, business and education. That program drew 600 stu-

dents last year, three times the size of in-person graduate-program enrollment — and it's expected to pull in an additional 100 graduate students this fall.

"We've been in the online arena for 10 years, when we launched our first online master's degree, and we believe that we've gotten it to a point where we understand the students and online learning, that we're really prepared to serve undergraduates in the same way," Recznik said.

In addition to the digital classroom, the university encourages graduate students to become involved in their local parish. The school also has assigned a chaplain for online students and maintains Facebook groups where they can discuss personal matters and exchange prayer requests. Recznik said the school will take similar measures to ensure undergraduate students are connected to each other online.

This fall, some students are opting for online classes because of COVID-19. Over the long term, the program is aimed at two distinct demographic groups. One is traditional learners who can be older and want to finish their undergraduate degrees or

just learn more about their faith without receiving a formal degree. These students range in age from their 20s to 70s.

But there is a second group Steubenville is eyeing: growing numbers of high-school seniors who are approaching college in a different way in a digital world. "These are digital natives," Recznik said. "So this is second nature to them."

Despite the new venture, the in-person ungraduate enrollment is expected to grow by about 200 students to 2,250 this year, including part-timers. The university's decision to cover all fall 2020 tuition for new students, after accounting for grants and scholarships, helped boost the numbers. "We knew COVID was really impacting families negatively in many different ways, financially being one of them, and we wanted to help," Recznik said.

On-Campus Options

Some smaller Catholic colleges have decided they can safely return to regular classes this fall. One is Thomas Aquinas College, whose main campus in California is largely self-contained, surrounded by the foothills of the Los Padres National Forest.

Another rural college ducking the digital trend is Christendom College. On the map it's just under an hour and a half away from the nation's capital, but the college's location in rural Virginia next to the Shenandoah National Park and the George Washington National Forest make it seem far more remote.

"Christendom is blessed to be a small, residential college in a rural setting, with less than 500 students living on campus," Timothy O'Donnell, the college president, told the Register. "In light of these realities, we are moving forward with reasonable modifications for the good of our particular community. Our liberal arts education is bolstered and supported by a robust faith environment and critically important social formation. I am confident that we can focus on the well-being of our community members while still living out our educational apostolate in a full way."

Stephen Beale writes from Providence, Rhode Island.

In Defense of Core Classes

Let St. Bonaventure Guide Your Time at College

COMMENTARY

BY JOSEPH VON CLEF

When I was making my final decisions on which college to attend, my dad gave me a piece of advice: "Your degree is a means to an end." This function of the bachelor's degree is pretty common: College education leads to a career. When we finally figure out the subject we want to study, therefore, taking classes that have nothing to do with that field seems absurd. Why should an arts major take science classes, or a science major take philosophy classes?

The great philosopher and theologian St. Bonaventure had something different to say about the real purpose of study. Looking to his thought, we can see that when we expose ourselves to a variety of fields like we do in a core curriculum, we do not distract ourselves from our major, but rather narrow our focus on an integrated system of wisdom that finds its end in our fulfillment in and union with God.

One key aspect of Bonaventure's metaphysics that illuminates this concept is the idea of exemplarism. This idea holds that we can come to know the Creator by knowledge of his creation. As Frederick Copleston states in the second volume of *A History of Philosophy*, the philosopher abstracts from the particular to grasp the universal: "The metaphysician, he says, proceeds from the consideration of created, particular substance to the uncreated and universal substance ..." (258). In this case the student, by considering the particular — the created substances — begins to grasp the universal — God as Creator of the particular.

It is on this foundation that Bonaventure sees every creature as a "vestige," that is, everything created must have a trace or signature of the Creator. "For we are so created that the material universe itself is a ladder by which we may ascend to God" (*The Journey of the Mind to God*, I.2). Bonaventure writes that,



Claude François painting of St. Bonaventure public domain/Wikipedia

due to our fallen nature, we have separated ourselves from full knowledge of God. Because God is revealed through his creation, however, we may use creation as a means of getting back to him. "In order to arrive at the consideration of the First Principle, which is the most spiritual being and eternal and above us, we must pass through vestiges which are corporeal and temporal and outside us" (Ibid).

Here, then, we come to understand the true end of our studies: God. Insofar as everything created echoes the Creator, Bonaventure holds that when we study creation, we are growing closer to full knowledge of God. The consequence of this is that every field of knowledge, no matter how technically distinct (or seemingly irrelevant to our career goals), can be traced back to a singular exemplary field: "And the truth that the mind can attain is ultimately one; all the multifarious paths of knowledge find their unity in the one truth. ... It is not just that these disciplines ultimately lead to the same object; it is that Christianity is the true philosophy, for it is the wisdom that draws man to his proper end and goal" (*Great Medieval Thinkers: Bonaventure*, 26).

Why, then, require each bachelor program to touch on separate fields? Why have a philosophy major study biology or a theology major study English? Bonaventure holds that, in expanding our knowledge of creation, we expand our journey to God. Each step of wisdom is a step higher on the ladder of truth. The multifarious way, when

directed toward God, finds a greater fulfillment than if it had been narrowed by a singular field.

"It is likewise evident how wide is the illuminative way and how in everything which is perceived or known God Himself lies hidden within. And this is the fruit of all sciences, that in all, faith may be strengthened, God may be honored, character may be formed, and consolation may be derived from union of the Spouse with His beloved, a union which takes place through charity, to the attainment of which the whole purpose of Sacred Scripture and, consequently, every illumination descending from above is directed — a charity without which all knowledge is vain — because no one comes to the Son except through the Holy Ghost, who teaches us all the truth, who is blessed forever" (*Retracing the Arts to Theology*, 25).

We see, then, through these select ideas drawn from Bonaventure's thought that the true purpose of our studies is ultimately union with God. Each and every subject of knowledge is a vestige of the Creator. Thus, when we contemplate creation, we contemplate truth. We study the liberal arts in all its variety not to distract ourselves from our purpose but, rather, to direct ourselves to our end. So, next time you begrudgingly try to "get through" yet another core class, look again through the perspective that Bonaventure lays out: that when we grow in knowledge, we grow in virtue; we expose ourselves to the light — the exemplary Cause of this and all subjects and our perfect fulfillment.

Joseph von Clef is a current student at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

FURTHER READING

Bonaventure, The Journey of the Mind to God. *Trans. Philotheus Boehner*; *Bonaventure*, Reducing the Arts to Theology; *Copleston, Frederick*, A History of Philosophy; Volume II: Medieval Philosophy; *Cullen, Christopher M*, Great Medieval Thinkers: Bonaventure

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