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U.S. COLLEGES WITH RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS: WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW

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When researching colleges and universities, students often have religiously affiliated schools on their list. Knowing what to expect or how a particular school may affect a student's academic and college life is important to understand early in the selection process.

There were 3,893 degree-granting institutions of higher education in the U.S. in fall 2021, and 849 were religiously affiliated, according to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Some of these institutions include the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, which is affiliated with the Congregation of Holy Cross; Baylor University in Texas, a Baptist university; Emory University in Georgia, founded by Methodists; Yeshiva University in New York, a Jewish university; and Wilberforce University in Ohio, which is affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Colleges founded by religious groups "have opened their doors to diversity," says Mary Banks, director of admissions consulting at Quad Education Group.

Attending a religiously affiliated college can be an attractive option. While some students may be drawn because a school matches with their faith, others may be seeking a supportive atmosphere or opportunities for spiritual growth and exploration that can make this type of college a natural choice, experts say.

"When students seek to maintain and replicate their family values, a religious university provides a safe space," Banks says.

Some colleges are religious only in their origins, but others have integrated their faith into all parts of campus life. Here are some things students should know about religiously affiliated colleges and universities.

Everyone Is Welcomed

Most religiously affiliated universities do not require students to be of the same faith or any faith at all to attend.

“While these schools may ask and consider a student’s faith in the admissions process, they still value the same diverse student body, academic freedom and supportive campus community that all top schools do,” says Jayson Weingarten, senior admissions consultant for Ivy Coach.

One of the biggest misconceptions about a university with a religious affiliation is that “everyone there shares that faith and those who do not will quickly be inculcated in that faith. That’s simply not the case,” Weingarten says.

Among religiously affiliated colleges and universities across the U.S., there are about 230 Catholic colleges and universities, says Donna M. Carroll, executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. She says a common misperception of Catholic institutions is that they enroll only Catholic students, but the reality is “only about half of all students attending Catholic colleges and universities self-identify as Catholic.”

Carroll says students of other faith traditions are often drawn to Catholic schools “because they feel that the Catholic campus culture will be more respectful and supportive of their faith life than a secular institution.”

Religious Involvement Varies by Campus

Religiously affiliated colleges are not all the same and have different levels of religious involvement on campus.

“An ill-informed applicant might think a Jesuit school would require him or her to attend religious instruction or perhaps mass on Sunday. This is no longer part of the Catholic university experience, nor is it required at most religiously affiliated programs,” Banks says.

At religiously affiliated institutions like Boston University in Massachusetts and Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., the student experience is largely unaffected.

“Many of these schools do have a theology requirement, but these schools offer many nonreligious general philosophy or ethics courses to fulfill that expectation,” Weingarten says.

However, at some colleges, students may be required to take a religion class or attend some sort of regular convocation or event during their studies.

For example, Brigham Young University in Utah is owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and requires students to follow a strict code of conduct and, for degree-seekers, to take religion courses as part of the general curriculum. Baylor requires all undergraduate students to take two separate semesters of chapel to graduate.

Diversity of Opinion Is Celebrated

Religiously affiliated universities often feature smaller class sizes and campuses and lower student-to-faculty ratios, which aid in nurturing diversity of thought, experts say.

“Living in a pluralistic society means appreciating and respecting other ideas with room for respectful disagreement,” says Amanda Staggenborg, chief communications officer for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

For example, the University of San Diego in California, a Catholic university, offers courses such as Islamic Thought and Culture, LGBTQ+ and Christianity, The Hindu Tradition, The Prophetic Tradition of Israel, Indigenous Religions and Spiritualities, and The Problem of God.

“There is sometimes a misperception that Catholic colleges and universities take a narrow view when, at most institutions, the reverse is true. The search for truth requires input from diverse experiences and perspectives,” Carroll says.

Some religiously affiliated universities also have chaplains and related staff representing multiple faiths. Tufts University in Massachusetts, for instance, lists eight chaplains on its website from numerous faith traditions.

“Many of the larger Catholic institutions do, in fact, have religiously diverse ministry teams, and large and small have active interfaith efforts,” Carroll says.

Whether a university is religiously affiliated or not, Weingarten says, students “will always be drawn to our nation’s most highly selective universities,” mainly for their academic programs, campus culture and community, and sports teams. That includes many religiously affiliated universities.

Banks encourages prospective students to talk to administrators and current students on the campuses they are considering.

“The welcome mat is out,” Banks says. “Do your research and include these universities in your school lists whether you’re seeking to remain in your comfort zone or are seeking a challenging environment that is culturally different.”