

Serra aims to keep college students connected to Catholic faith

The United States Council of Serra unveiled its new College Connection Program this spring, which connects college-bound students with the Catholic presence on and off campus, particularly at non-Catholic public and private universities.

The program has been adopted by 10 dioceses after test sites in six states showed positive results. Serra clubs gathered almost 3,300 names of students from 53 parishes and 21 high schools this summer and furnished the majority of them with information packets on the Catholic presence at the schools where they planned to attend.

Nearly 250 Catholic high school students who attended the University of

Toledo, Ohio this fall, received personal welcome letters from members of the Catholic Student Association (CSA) over the summer, as well as a letter and information on Mass times and Catholic programs from Father Jim Bacik, pastor of Corpus Christi University Parish, which serves the campus. UT was one of the test sites for Serra, and has experienced an increase in new student participation in CSA and attendance at Corpus Christi.

"Names are like gold for us. We have many stories of students who received a letter and personal invitation, who are coming here and finding us. Without the names, we can't do it," says Father Bacik, who has been in campus ministry for 37 years, 25 of which have been with Corpus Christi parish.

Serra reviewed a 2003 study on campus ministry compiled for the U.S. Catholic Bishops by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. It concluded that if participation in Catholic campus ministry increased by just 10 percent, there would be a noticeable increase in vocations, church attendance and parish leadership in future years.

Serra's Chairman, Dick Stolly, said the College Connection program has been well-received by Catholic campus ministers at public colleges because they are blocked by privacy law from obtaining the religious preference of incoming students.

"At big secular schools, a campus minister is looking to know even 20 percent of the Catholics who are coming there, and that's a high number," he said.

In a letter to Serra officers, directors and committee members, Stolly noted that almost two-thirds of those who entered the Theolgate level of seminaries last year came from private or secular colleges. 'It can hardly be said that Campus Ministry is not important as a major seedbed for vocations,' he wrote.

As the Episcopal Moderator for Serra USA, Bishop Blasé Cupich of the Diocese of Rapid City, was involved at the planning

stages of the College Connection program. He said that while Serra is interested in our youth, they are also concerned about vocations to the priesthood and vowed life, and the College Connection program increases the likelihood that vocations will be cultivated by connecting ministries offered with these young Catholics.

"There always has been outreach to college students and Newman Centers are perhaps the best known and best developed college

ministry programs," he said. "Serra's program aims at bridging the gap between the solid Catholic programs on college campuses and the students. It is an innovative approach to making sure that the resources of the Church and the programs we have developed reach our young people. And, as the chair of the Bishops' Committee on Vocations, it has the promise of identifying and nurturing vocations."

The College Connection program will operate under Serra's Vocation Committee, which will guide the future of the program. Serra's goal is to expand the program through its network of 315 clubs nationwide. The program is expected to triple or quadruple in size by next year as more local Serra clubs participate.

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Serra Club of Lima, Serra College program featured on EWTN's *Life on the Rock*
Photo by Janet Dornick,