

# COMO EN CASA:

## How Latina/o College Students Thrive in Catholic Campus Life

A Summary Report of Findings from the Study of  
Latina/o College Students in Catholic Campus Ministries



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# Table of Contents

Foreword . . . . .	3
Executive Summary . . . . .	4
Introduction . . . . .	5
A Note on Terminology . . . . .	6
About the Study . . . . .	7
Findings . . . . .	10
Exploration, Questioning, and Growth . . . . .	11
A Personal Relationship with God . . . . .	14
Living the Faith . . . . .	17
Faith Como en Casa . . . . .	20
Practicing Faith Como en Casa . . . . .	26
Conclusion . . . . .	27
Endnotes . . . . .	28

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# Foreword

In 2017, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) commissioned a ground-breaking national study to assess the state of Catholic campus ministries in the United States. At that time, the study found that a large majority (86%) of campus ministers nationwide identified as white non-Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> If the racial/ethnic composition of campus ministers has changed since then, it's unlikely to have kept up with the rapid growth of Latina/o students on college campuses—a demographic that has more than *doubled* in the past two decades. The large presence of Latina/o students on campus—with the challenges, gifts, and opportunities they bring—signals a pastoral imperative for campus ministers of every race and ethnicity to engage and accompany this growing segment in our schools, the country, and the global Church.

The bishops' words in the 1985 document, *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future*, though written long before this unprecedented growth, affirm this imperative. In it, the U.S. bishops write that “the work of campus ministry requires continual evaluation of traditional methods of ministry and also new approaches which are licitly and responsibly employed.”<sup>2</sup> *Como en Casa: How Latina/o College Students Thrive in Catholic Campus Life* offers timely insights and new understandings of how to accompany today's college-aged Latina/o students through culturally sustaining practices—that is, accompaniment rooted in the religious, cultural, communal, linguistic, and social capital of our students and the communities from which they come.<sup>3</sup> It is the first national study that addresses the experiences of Latina/o students within Catholic campus ministries across the United States by uniquely situating students' voices at the center of analyses.

At the heart of this study is a nuanced understanding of spiritual thriving. *Como en Casa* offers an interesting look into how campus ministers' and Latina/o students' perceptions of thriving sometimes diverge. Tuning into how Latina/o students understand and experience thriving can help pastoral workers create integrated and inclusive environments.

Insights from the interviews that we conducted with students and campus ministers offer a nuanced understanding of spiritual thriving:

- Reserve judgment, listen deeply, and encounter students where they find themselves;
- Creatively engage the expressions of Hispanic Catholicism in liturgical and paraliturgical moments, fostering an environment that bridges faith, culture, and the arts;
- Attune to the spiritual and religious expressions of Latina/o students *en lo cotidiano* (in the everyday);
- Work more collaboratively with young Latina/o Catholics—through a process of synodality—to affirm and welcome their theological voices in the present and future of higher education, the Church, and society.

Ultimately, by attending to how Latina/o students experience faith, belonging, and spiritual thriving within Catholic campus ministries, this study aims to inspire the Church, ministers, and administrators of higher education to see students as *protagonistas*—active bearers of a vibrant, communal, and liberative Catholicism.



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# Executive Summary

This report explores how Latina/o college students define and experience spiritual thriving within Catholic campus ministries across the United States. Based on surveys and interviews with students and campus ministers from diverse Catholic and secular institutions, this study centers the voices of Latina/o students to understand how they cultivate meaningful faith lives in college.

Findings reveal that Latina/o students and campus ministers often understand “thriving” differently. Ministers tend to emphasize regular sacramental participation, involvement in campus ministry, and a mature relationship with God. Students describe thriving as an ongoing process involving:

## 1. Exploration, questioning, and growth

Latina/o students describe thriving as a lifelong journey of spiritual development rather than a destination to be reached. Students experience their campus ministries as safe spaces to explore faith and ask questions. Trusting relationships with ministers are key to creating these spaces.

## 2. A personal relationship with God

Latina/o students see a personal relationship with God as key to thriving. Many students say they deepen their relationship with God by participating in the sacramental and ritual life of the Church. Campus ministries often help these students discover (or recover) this connection in a meaningful and personal way.

## 3. Living one’s faith

For Latina/o students, a key marker of thriving is the extent to which their faith shapes their everyday lives—how they live their faith through their daily choices, relationships, and habits. College students, busy as they are, find support for living the faith through friendship with other students involved in campus ministry. Service and leadership, too, help students put their faith into action.

## 4. Expressing faith *latinamente, como en casa*:

The ability to express one’s faith through cultural rituals and traditions is linked to thriving for Latina/o students. Cultural expressions of faith help these students feel connected to their families, heritage, and to other Latina/o students. Campus ministers recognize the importance of culturally responsive ministry, but some face uncertainty or structural barriers that prevent its implementation. Still, Latina/o students overwhelmingly say they feel their cultures and identities are respected in campus ministry spaces.

As Catholic campus ministries continue to accompany a growing number of Latina/o students, this study offers an opportunity to reflect on spiritual thriving and how one may engage with diverse conceptions of it. **The goal is thus not to redefine what it means to spiritually thrive, but to recognize the many ways young people already understand themselves to be living it out.**



# Introduction

The Latina/o population in US colleges and universities has grown significantly over the past two decades. In fact, Latina/o enrollment in US colleges and universities more than doubled between 2000 and 2025. Once 10% of the share of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions, Latina/os today make up roughly 1 in 5 undergraduate students nationwide.<sup>4</sup>

Latina/os also constitute a substantial segment of the US Catholic population. As of 2025, over one-third of US Catholics are Latina/o.<sup>5</sup> While *young* Latina/os represent a smaller proportion of that percentage, many college-aged Latina/os continue to identify as Catholic, participate in the sacraments, and engage in ritual and devotional traditions. Some experience cultural continuity and a deep connection to family through their faith.

Some Catholic campus ministries have responded to these shifting demographic realities by incorporating cultural expressions of faith on campus. Hispanic feast day celebrations, Marian devotions, and bilingual liturgies allow Latina/o students to experience Catholic life in ways that feel familiar—faith *como en casa*, as practiced at home, with family and community.

As Catholic campus ministries across secular and faith-based institutions continue to accompany a growing number of Latina/o young people in colleges and universities, questions remain about how best to serve these students' spiritual and cultural needs. How, for example, do these students describe the role of *culturally responsive ministry* in their formation and spiritual thriving?<sup>5</sup>

**How do campus ministers understand and assess thriving? What about Latina/o students themselves—how do *they* define and experience thriving? To what extent do these definitions overlap, and where do they differ?**

This study provides insight into these questions by offering a social scientific analysis of Latina/o college students' experiences in Catholic campus ministries. Drawing on survey and interview data, it reveals Latina/o students' own definitions of what it means to thrive in their faith lives, including how those understandings are shaped by culture, community, and campus life. The report also features the voices of campus ministers who work to recognize and celebrate the gifts of their students on campus and in the Church.

**Ultimately, this report seeks to build understanding about Latina/o students in Catholic campus ministries grounded in students' own perspectives and in their own words.**

This report is organized into five sections: (1) "A Note on Terminology" explains how and why we use the term "Latina/o" to describe people of Latin American origin or descent; (2) "About the Study" describes the study's methodology and sample characteristics; (3) "Findings" outlines key themes on spiritual thriving that arise from our interviews with Latina/o students and campus ministers, weaving relevant survey data throughout each theme to illustrate how individual stories relate to broader patterns among Latina/o students in the study; (4) "Practicing Faith *Como en Casa*" offers a practitioner's perspective on how these insights can inform real-world efforts to minister with Latina/o young people in Catholic campus ministries and beyond; (5) finally, the report's "Conclusion" summarizes key takeaways and reflects on the study's implications.

## A Note on Terminology

The preferred terms for people of Latin American origin or descent continually evolve. Factors like age, nativity, language, region, immigrant generation, national origin, discrimination, and skin color tend to shape these preferences. Some people identify with their family's country of origin—as, for example, “Mexican” or “Mexican-American.” Others prefer to use “Hispanic” or “Latina/o,” panethnic terms that refer to Spanish speakers and Latin American ancestry, respectively. “Latin@,” “Latinx,” and “Latine” offer gender neutral alternatives to the terms “Latino” and “Latina.”

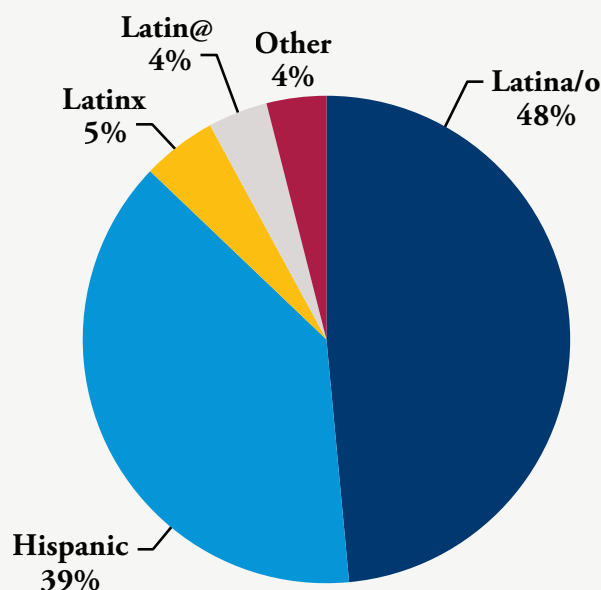
In this report, we follow a longstanding tradition in the social sciences of using the terms preferred by our research participants. Nearly half (49%) of the Latina/o students in Catholic campus ministries surveyed for this study prefer using the term “Latina/o” over terms like “Hispanic” or “Latinx” to describe people of Latin American origin or descent.

When asked to choose between the terms “Hispanic” or “Latina/o,” 39% of students surveyed prefer “Latina/o,” 37% report having no preference, and 25% prefer the term “Hispanic.”

We also asked Latina/o students an open-ended question about their preferred racial or ethnic identification, asking: “If you could describe your race or ethnicity in any way you wanted, how would you describe yourself?” In their answers to the question, about a quarter (26%) identify as “Latina/o” or “Hispanic.” Another quarter (26%) list their national origin or origins, such as “Mexican,” “Brazilian,” or “Salvadoran-American.” A smaller percentage (14%) identify as both “Latina/o” or “Hispanic” *and* Black, White, or “mixed” race. Even fewer (12%) self-describe using non-racial/ethnic terms such as “hardworking,” “resilient,” “joyful,” and “beautiful.”

### What term do you prefer to use to describe people of Latin American origin or descent?

*Percentage of Latina/o students responding:*



**Source:** Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024  
*Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)*

Considering these preferences, we use “Latina/o” when referring to the broader study population (e.g., “Latina/o college students”) and use study participants’ preferred terms when excerpting from a specific individual’s interview or open-ended survey responses (e.g., “Hispanic,” “Latina/o,” “Latinx,” or “Latine”).

# About the Study

Recruitment for the *Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries* involved leveraging Dominican University's PASOS Network to invite respondents from across the U.S. to take a survey about their experiences in Catholic campus ministries. Latina/o students answered questions about their experiences with campus ministry and their racial/ethnic and religious identities, while campus ministers answered questions about their experiences with and perceptions of Latina/o students. Incentivized by a chance to win one of five \$50 gift cards, 77 campus ministers and 57 students completed the survey between April and October 2024.

Latina/o students surveyed tend to be U.S.-born, Catholic women in their junior or senior year of college at a Catholic, Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the Midwest.<sup>6</sup> About half of these students have at least one college-educated parent, while the other half are first-generation students.

Ranging in age, most campus ministers who took the survey are U.S.-born, white, Catholic laywomen. The majority work at Catholic colleges in the South and have ministered in their present (paid) roles for under 5 years. Nearly half of campus ministers surveyed say they do *not* currently work at an HSI. They are evenly split when it comes to having taken cultural competency training related to Latina/os in the U.S.



Survey Demographics: Latina/o Students (n=57)	
Age	
18–21	81%
22–25	19%
Gender	
Female	67%
Male	30%
Other	4%
Born in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico)	
No	25%
Yes	74%
Prefer not to say	2%
Religious Affiliation	
Catholic	86%
Protestant	2%
None	4%
Spiritual but not religious	5%
Other	4%
Attending a Catholic College or University	
No	11%
Yes	84%
Not sure	5%
Attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution	
No	18%
Yes	68%
Not sure	14%
Year in College or University	
First year / freshman	14%
Second year / sophomore	33%
Third year / junior	33%
Fourth year / senior	18%
First-Generation College Student	
No	46%
Yes	49%
Not sure	5%
College Region	
Midwest	46%
Northeast	7%
South	35%
West	12%

Survey Demographics: Campus Ministers (n=77)	
<b>Age</b>	
25 or under	12%
26–35	35%
36–45	22%
46–55	14%
56 or over	17%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	65%
Male	34%
Other	1%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Asian	4%
Black or African American	3%
Hispanic or Latina/o	35%
White	51%
Two or more races	7%
<b>Born in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico)</b>	
No	13%
Yes	86%
Prefer not to say	1%
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
Catholic	90%
Protestant	4%
Other	7%
<b>Clergy</b>	
No	82%
Yes	18%
<b>Working at a Catholic College or University</b>	
No	35%
Yes	65%
<b>Working at a Hispanic-Serving Institution</b>	
No	47%
Yes	33%
Not sure	21%
<b>Paid employee</b>	
No	34%
Yes	66%
<b>Time in Current Ministry Role</b>	
Less than 5 years	58%
5–10 years	22%
Over 10 years	20%
<b>Taken Cultural Competency Training</b>	
No	51%
Yes	49%
<b>College Region</b>	
Midwest	25%
Northeast	22%
South	48%
West	5%

We randomly selected a subset of survey respondents to participate in follow-up interviews. Conducted virtually and lasting an average of 75 minutes, interviews asked students to describe their religious upbringing, interactions with campus ministers, and the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in their faith practices and identity. Campus ministers answered questions about their approach to ministry and their experiences with Latina/o students.

Interviewees each received a \$50 digital gift card as compensation for their participation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, cleaned for accuracy, and subsequently coded using qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti. All the names in this report are pseudonyms. We removed identifying information from interview excerpts and open-ended survey responses to protect respondents' privacy.

Interview Demographics (n=20)	
<b>Interviewee</b>	
Student	55%
Campus Minister or Chaplain	45%
<b>Age</b>	
18–21	55%
Over 21	45%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	60%
Male	40%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic or Latina/o	70%
White	10%
Two or more races	20%
<b>Born in the US (including Puerto Rico)</b>	
No	5%
Yes	95%
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
Catholic	90%
Other	10%
<b>Working for / Attending a Catholic Institution</b>	
No	20%
Yes	80%
<b>Working for / Attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution</b>	
No	80%
Yes	20%
<b>College Region</b>	
Midwest	40%
Northeast	45%
South	15%

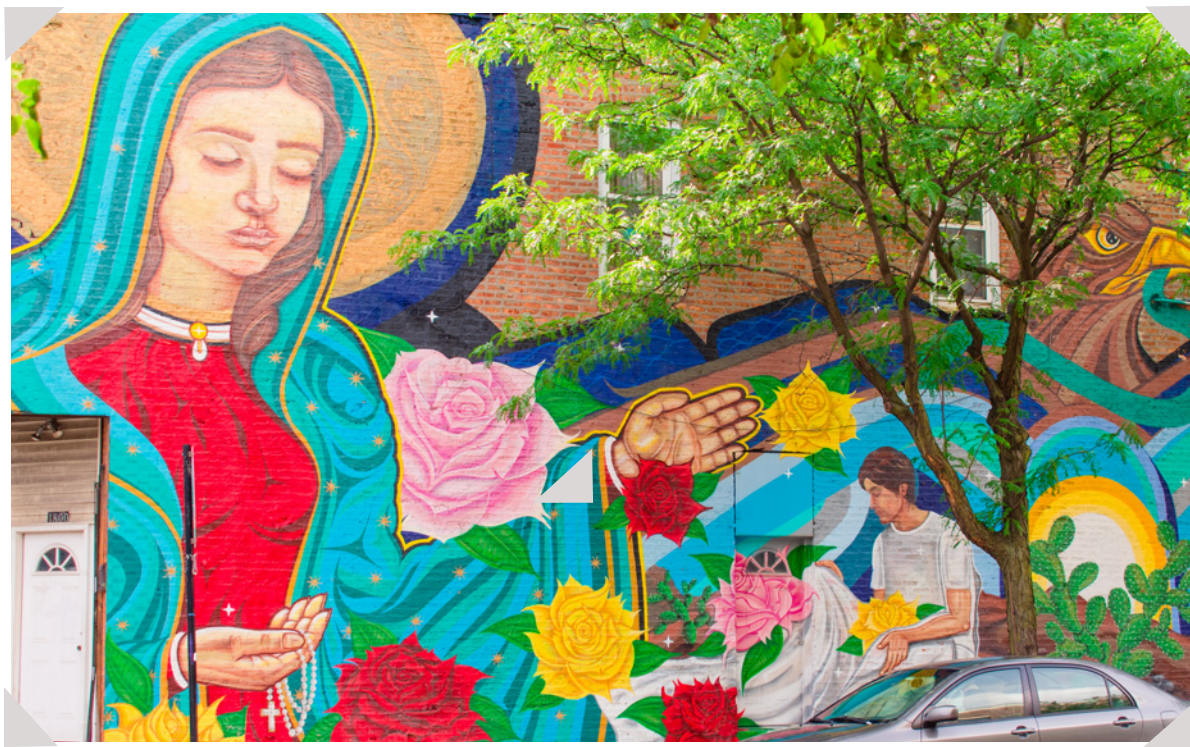


Data from these respondents offer a meaningful snapshot of Latina/o students' experiences in Catholic campus ministries. It is important to note, however, that these experiences may not represent those of Latina/o students everywhere.

First, these samples are modest in size and overrepresent female students and campus ministers (among other key demographics). Second, student experiences vary across factors like region, immigrant generation, school practices, and community demographics. Latina/o students in HSIs at the US-Mexico border may have different experiences than those in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the Northeast. Students' ministry experiences in private Catholic colleges may vary from those who attend secular schools and participate in young adult groups at off-campus parishes. The realities

shaping international students or recent immigrants vary from those shaping second- or third-generation Latina/os. Thus, we focus on describing patterns that emerged among the specific groups of students and ministers who participated in this study rather than making broad claims about the general state of Latina/o students in Catholic campus ministries in the US.

At the same time, the consistency of certain themes—rising from diverse school settings—point to areas where ministries might reflect on, adapt, or deepen their engagement with Latina/o students. Where applicable, we clarify the scope of a finding and specify the contexts or subgroups to which it applies. Percentages reported may not total exactly 100% due to rounding.



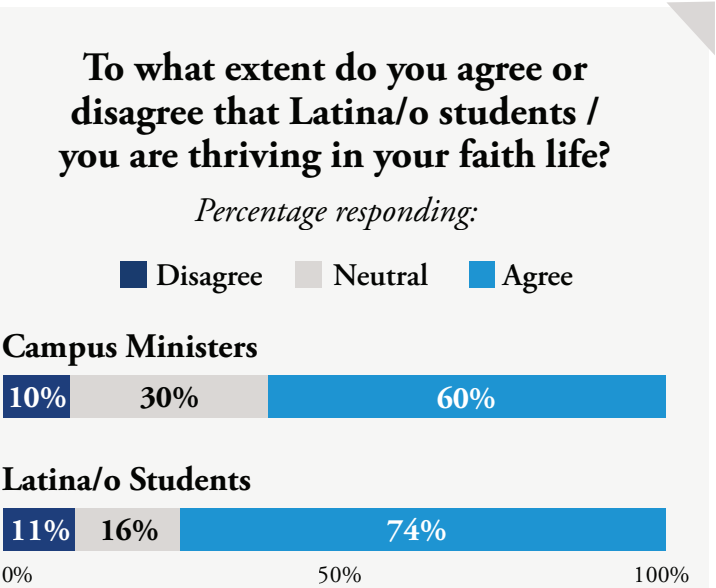
# Findings

In 2023, the PASOS Network, housed in Dominican University’s Division of Mission and Ministry, held its third annual “¡El Futuro is Here!” national conference in River Forest, IL. ¡El Futuro! gathered students, campus ministers, theologians, and administrators from Catholic colleges and universities across the US to celebrate and support the gifts and contributions of Latina/o young people on campus and in the Church.

After the conference, participants completed a survey to assess its impact and share feedback that could help with future iterations. The survey additionally asked participants questions about their experiences in campus ministry and ministering with Latina/o students, in particular.

**Analysis of the responses revealed a surprising discrepancy: when asked to evaluate Latina/o students’ spiritual thriving, a smaller share of campus ministers agreed that Latina/o students were thriving compared to the percentage of Latina/o students who said the same.**

We found this gap again when we surveyed Latina/o students and campus ministers in 2024:



Source: Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of *Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries* (n=134)

Were students overestimating their spiritual well-being? Were campus ministers *underestimating* it? How do each of these groups understand what it means to be thriving in one’s faith life? How are these definitions similar or different?

**Our findings reveal differences in how Latina/o students and campus ministers understand what it means to thrive spiritually.**

Three themes surfaced across campus ministers’ definitions of thriving: (1) active involvement in campus ministry and in the broader Church; (2) regular participation in the sacraments; and (3) a mature, personal relationship with God.

A few open-ended responses from the survey may help illustrate these themes.

We asked: “What would it look like for Latina/o students to be thriving in their faith lives?” Campus ministers responded:

*Regular reception of sacraments, daily prayer, striving to live virtue, [and a] healthy community life.*

*Daily Mass, frequenting confession, strong prayer life, whether through Adoration, Rosary, or any type of prayer form. Participation is serving the church in some form.*

*I think it would mean having more people show up to events in our Latina/o ministry, both who are Latina/o and that they are inviting their friends to experience it with them.*

*Regular participation in the sacraments, growth in a personal relationship with the Lord through prayer, active participation in a faith community.*

*Growing in love with Jesus, rooted in a faith community, participating in the sacramental life of the Church, and serving others in whatever way their gifts leads them to serve.*

*I think thriving would be attending weekly campus ministry events and helping to grow the community through involvement and leadership roles.*

*Actively participating in worship and one or two ministries offered to them.*

Compared to campus ministers, Latina/o students tended to describe thriving as an ongoing *process*, characterized by (1) spiritual exploration, questioning, and growth; (2) a personal relationship with God; (3) living one's faith; and (4) expressing faith *latinamente, como en casa* (that is, through cultural rituals and practices learned at home and in community).

While both campus ministers' and Latina/o students' perspectives are important, we organize the remainder of this section by themes rising from students' descriptions of spiritual thriving. This choice reflects the central aim of this study: **to understand spiritual life from the perspective of Latina/o students themselves.** By foregrounding students' language and frameworks, this report reveals how Latina/o students engage their faith and articulate an expansive, culturally situated understanding of spiritual thriving. Campus ministers' perspectives, woven throughout the findings, highlight points of connection and contrast.



## Exploration, Questioning, and Growth

*To be thriving in my faith life . . . I feel like it means to understand my strengths with faith but also my weaknesses and realizing I'm not perfect. I am heavily involved in campus ministry and at my home parish, but I don't think that defines fully just how much my faith is. I think if it truly is thriving, I understand that there's still time for growth.*

—Carlos, college sophomore

Many of the Latina/o students in this study see thriving as a lifelong process of spiritual development rather than a destination to be one day reached. Introspection, learning, and even wrestling with doubt can signal spiritual thriving to students. As Andrea tells us: "Maybe you're questioning, but that's a part of the process of having faith, so, *you are still thriving.*" Manuel defines thriving as the ability to "wonder and think about one's own faith on the regular." Dani believes that thriving is "when you are actively participating in Mass and are even questioning certain rituals and Scripture because it means you are trying to make sense of why we do what we do."

Students experience their campus ministries as safe spaces to explore their faith. **Trusting relationships with ministers—ones who normalize doubt and model open dialogue—are key to creating these spaces.**



Dominic describes his relationship with a campus minister who helped him through a period of questioning:

*If I have a question about my faith, he'll always answer it. When I was going through a questioning phase, asking, "Do I join a different denomination? Do I stay?" He gave me a lot of insight. He always has an answer for me. Even if he doesn't have the answer, he'll just be like, "I'm here for you, just to listen."*

These days, Dominic says he is "very much Catholic," adding, "I sin, like everyone else, but I love my faith. I love the Church."

**For some Latina/o students, campus ministry is among the only places they feel free to share questions and doubts.** Mariana, for example, told us that she once struggled to reconcile her faith with what she saw as the hypocritical behavior of other believers: "Often, the actions of people don't represent the religion itself. I was like, 'How do people that believe act this way? They're very hypocritical.'"

After sharing her thoughts, a family member told Mariana that God would be angry with her—even hate her—for questioning her faith in this way. Eventually, Mariana began to resent her family and even the Church, too. Now, Mariana sees her faith as a "relationship with God, not other people."

Crediting campus ministry for this change, Mariana explains:

*I would say that [campus ministry] felt like I could start to work on my faith and not be judged for it. It's an environment where others are going through the same thing. I felt more welcomed versus before where I felt like if I had any questions—it was bad. Growing up, I was taught one thing, and then, going to campus ministry, I realized that my questions and my feelings were normal. I wasn't "less than." I wouldn't be looked down upon just because I was having questions.*

In Mariana's case, expressing doubt in a safe setting enabled her to grow into a faith that was more authentic and personally meaningful.

This is the case, too, for Zaira, a college senior whose parents came to the US from Honduras. "I love my family. I 100% do," she says, "but my parents would kind of throw the Bible in our face . . . They used religion as an excuse to keep us in line."

Zaira says she, too, came to "resent religion" explaining she would go to Mass and pray, "but it didn't mean anything to me at all." Things changed when Zaira's theology professor invited her to get involved with campus ministry. There, her professor told her that "Christ doesn't just watch us suffer—he suffers with us." She says:

*That really stuck with me. I used to think, "Jesus is going to punish you. He doesn't like this and doesn't like that." So, when [my professor] said that to me, I reflected on it for a really long time. During the pandemic, I felt super isolated, super low, depressed and anxious. Then Good Friday happened and that was my first realization—Christ was crying, he was panicking, he was scared, and he had to accept that. He knows what it feels like. So, I thought, "You are suffering with me, and you're not looking down at me," and He said, "You're gonna get through this; I'll watch over you." So, that's what brought me comfort in my own relationship with religion.*

Being able to ask those questions often allows students, like Zaira, to create a faith life that, while rooted in family and culture, is also uniquely their own.

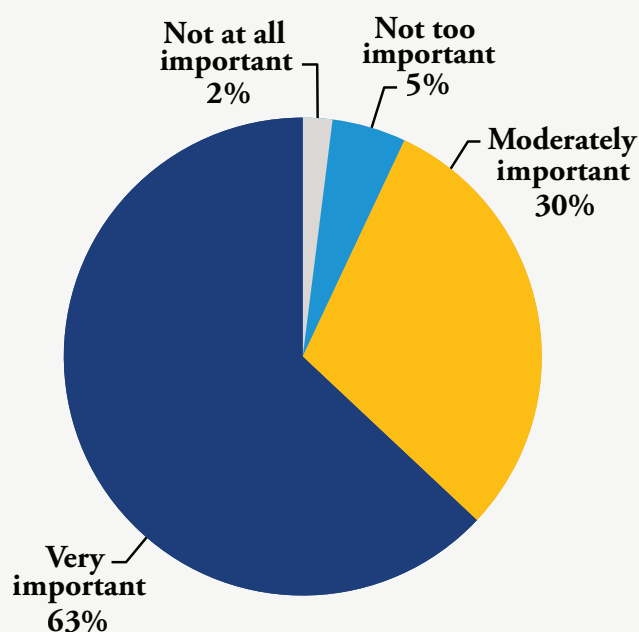
Beatriz, for example, began singing in her church's choir at the age of six. She says:

*The funny thing is that when you're six, you don't really know much about anything. All you know is that Jesus loves you, and you know, all the typical catecismo (catechism) stuff. But with music in my campus ministry, I've really grown in the Church and got to know more about my faith. I know more about my spirituality and religion and how it works and everything.*

Like Beatriz, many Latina/o students say that learning about the Catholic faith is key to spiritual thriving. **In fact, nearly all the students surveyed (93%) say that learning about Church beliefs and traditions is an important outcome of their involvement in campus ministry.**

## How important is it for you to learn about Church beliefs and traditions through campus ministry?

Percentage of Latino students responding:



**Source:** Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of Latino Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)

Campus ministers say this is a key focus of theirs, as well: 77% report their ministries are *moderately* or *very* focused on teaching students about Church beliefs and traditions.

This alignment between students' needs and ministers' priorities is noteworthy, given that some students describe having initially held back from getting involved in campus ministry because they felt they lacked knowledge about the Catholic faith. Alejandra says that when she first became involved, she felt insecure that she did not "know enough" about

Church teachings to participate fully in ministry life. This led her to worry: "Oh my gosh, maybe I'm not as Catholic as I thought I was."

Her campus ministry gave her the space to learn about the faith without the fear of judgment, something that Alejandra says was key to developing her Catholic identity. She now believes she's "always going to have more to learn":

*It doesn't mean that I don't have a great relationship with God because that's the number one thing that makes me who I am.*

Having a non-judgmental environment for religious exploration and learning may be especially important for Latina/o students whose ethnic identity is often closely tied to their Catholic faith. **The intertwining of identities means that questioning religious beliefs or teachings can sometimes feel like questioning one's entire identity.** Questions at home may thus come with personal or familial costs, as it did for Mariana.

Observing this dynamic among her Latina/o students, Jennifer, a campus minister, shares:

*It's not just a religious crisis. It's also a crisis of [wondering]: "How would I relate to my family if I'm honest about this?" There's an awareness that this is going to cost them; there's fear and questioning about whether or not it's going to be worth that cost to see this journey through.*





As a campus minister, Laura tells us that when she “sees a student who is thriving in their faith life . . . they’re a person who isn’t afraid to question.” Asked *why* questioning is central to spiritual thriving, she explains:

*College is a particularly interesting time of life where questions are coming up for just about everything. And, so, I think their faith also has to be open to that. Things are gonna become a lot more complicated in life and in faith. I think you have to be willing to ask those questions, sit with those questions, and be willing to not necessarily get an answer.*

In sum, Latina/o students express that thriving in one’s faith is not about having all of the answers—it’s about choosing to engage in a process of exploration and discovery. Students report that campus ministers who foster open, nonjudgmental environments where students can ask questions, wrestle with doubts, and deepen their knowledge about the Catholic faith play a crucial role in supporting spiritual thriving. These ministers teach students that questioning marks an active and engaged spiritual life rather than signaling a lack of faith.

As a result, Latina/o students describe confidence in their ability to shape a faith identity that is both rooted in the Church and personally meaningful.



## A Personal Relationship with God

*The happier and the more fulfilled I am—that is when I’m closest with God and when I’m devoting time to Him, because at the end of the day, He is more than just my Creator. He is also like my Father, and the more that I spend time with Him, the more that I’m closer to the Being that created me and that loves me and wants what’s best for me. So, even though I fail and I mess up a lot, I think that it’s so beautiful to know that I’m loved by a God who will always give me a second chance and will always want me with him no matter how, how many times I turn away from him.*

—Santiago, college senior

The above excerpt from Santiago’s interview illustrates a second common theme among Latina/o students’ definitions of thriving: a deeply personal relationship with God.

Three-quarters (75%) of the Latina/o students we surveyed say that deepening their personal relationship to God through their involvement in campus ministry is *very* important to them. In fact, students rated it as *the* most important outcome of those we asked about in the survey. Finding friendship with other students (74%), developing one’s faith identity (70%), and seeing how Catholic teachings apply in everyday life (70%) followed in frequency.

Students often describe this relationship in affective terms, suggesting a sense of emotional intimacy and familiarity. Like, Dominic, who says:

*The way like I look at God, it's almost like— you ever just hugged your mom, or your dad and you just felt like super-duper secure? . . . When I'm sitting in a pew and I look up at the tabernacle or the altar or Christ on the cross, it's like, "Oh my God; that's my Father. He loves me so much."*

Eduardo describes God as “like a friend . . . who really loves you.” Samantha says she feels like she can “turn to” God “if something great happens, to say, ‘Thank you’ or if something bad happens to say, ‘Oh, this went bad.’”

Like their general approach to spirituality, Latina/o students portray their relationship with God as an ongoing journey, not a destination. **While the majority (67%) of the Latina/o students we surveyed express an *undoubting* belief in God, their relationship with God is something that, in Luisa’s words, students are continually “working towards.”**

Jenni, for example, speaks of thriving as feeling “even *partially* connected” to God, while Daniel says thriving is “finding oneself at peace” with where one is in that relationship. Eduardo describes his relationship with God as “nonlinear,” admitting he “gets distracted” and doesn’t always “prioritize it.” Mariana occasionally feels “confused” about her relationship with God. She says she struggles to reconcile her beliefs about God—“He loves everybody”—with the Church’s positions on gender, sexuality, and divorce.

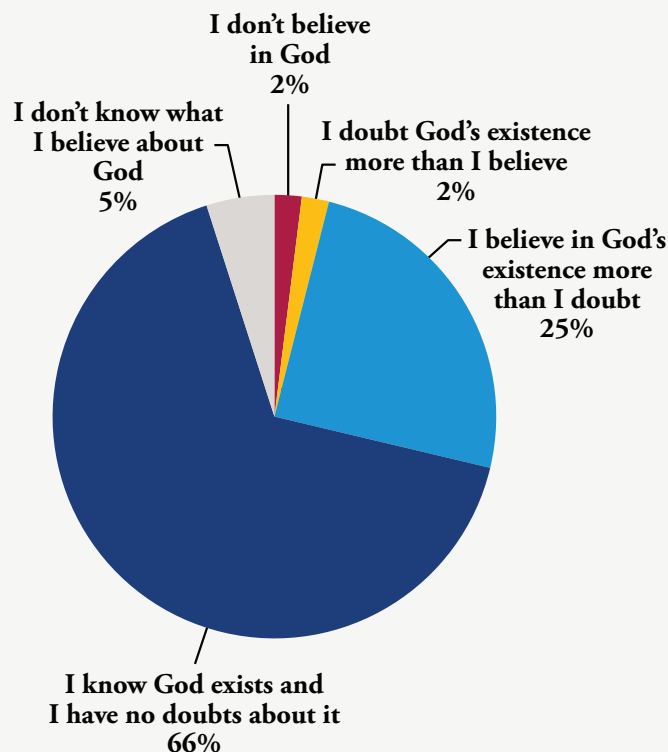
Many interviewees say they deepen their relationship with God by participating in the sacramental and ritual life of the Church. Most of the Latina/o students we surveyed report attending Mass on a weekly basis (68%). Almost all say they pray to God outside of Mass (95%), and majorities also report praying for the intercession of *La Virgen* (the Virgin Mary, 68%),

the angels and saints (64%), and family members or ancestors who have passed away (53%). Over half report attending Eucharistic Adoration at least once a month (57%).

Claudia says that Mass, Communion, Confession, and prayer are “opportunit[ies] to grow in my relationship with Christ. They never feel like a chore.” Regarding Adoration, Samantha explains, “I can just sit in front of the Blessed Sacrament and let it all out and talk to God.”

## Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?

*Percentage of Latina/o students responding:*



**Source:** Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024  
*Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)*

For some Latina/o students, these rituals are longstanding habits formed in childhood:

*I consistently go to Mass on Sundays because that was something I grew up doing, and it felt like home.*

—Elena

*It was always important for me to go to Mass. My parents would never let us miss . . . I think I was born with some level of obedience to God.*

—Santiago

For others, campus ministry is the place where they discover (or recover) these practices in a meaningful way:

*I hadn't grown up going to [Mass] . . . I got introduced to this new Latino ministry for undergrad students, and that was my first introduction.*

—Ariana

*I wasn't going to Mass my freshman year. But ever since sophomore year, I came to Mass for the first time on campus. I got invited to this men's group night, and [that's how] I started getting more involved.*

—Eduardo

A common thread across many Latina/o students' stories is the desire to take ownership of their faith through their relationship with God. Several students spoke of the impact of campus ministers who helped them do just that.

Itzel's campus ministers, for example, affirmed her desire to set personal boundaries and reclaim agency over her beliefs:

*I didn't think I ever was gonna get involved in campus ministry because I never really got involved in the church when I was younger. Like, obviously my mom would be like, "Tienes que ir a misa"—you have to go to Mass—so we would go to Mass and stuff like that. When I got to college, I was like, "I'm not gonna take a theology class. I'm gonna pretend like campus ministry doesn't exist." And I told my mom that I don't know if I believe in God. But then I started doing it, and I realized how much I really*

*did like it because it wasn't just like, "This is God and you have to believe in him because you have to—" it was, "Religion is in everything, and it's in everyone."*

Zaira, too, explains:

*At first, I almost felt like my relationship with God wasn't my relationship. It was almost between me, God, and my parents, which was really hard . . . But I feel like campus ministers helped me develop my own relationship in my own way with God.*

Many campus ministers are aware that some Latina/o students feel they've inherited a faith that is not truly their own. Maria, a Latina campus minister, experienced this dynamic firsthand. She tells us, "Whenever I asked my mom questions about faith, it was, 'Well, this is what your grandma used to do.'" Maria went on to attend a Catholic college where she was "amazed that I could learn my faith in the classroom." Her campus ministers helped "form my young mind, heart, and soul." She eventually became a campus minister because she "wanted to do that for others." Maria says she wants her Latina/o students to know:

*God loves them in whatever stage they're at—whether they're super into their faith or maybe they haven't been in their faith at all. 'Cause I think that growing up in a Latino household, it's kind of like the punishment method of, like, if you're not going to Mass, God hates you, or you're going to go to hell. But no—God is gentle and loving. He loves you where you are at and is ready to receive you whenever you're ready.*

Some campus ministers link the reclaiming of one's relationship with God or one's faith to spiritual thriving. Jesús, for example, says that students thrive when they "find a space that's home for you. I think it's asking the deep questions, challenging your own faith, conversing with God, and trying different forms of prayer." Nadia, an interfaith chaplain, describes thriving as "being knowledgeable about one's faith and not just following a tradition because of one's family, but firmly having conviction in it." Amy shares

that Latina/o students who are thriving in their faith life “ask questions about their faith” and “distinguish between their upbringing in a faith tradition and how they have made it—or are making it—their own.”

Taken together, these accounts highlight how, for Latina/o students, thriving involves a particular type of relationship with God—one that students often describe in emotional, embodied, and personal terms. It is not always linear or without challenges; students speak openly about disconnection and the work of returning. But in doing so, Latina/o students reveal a view of thriving that is spacious enough to include doubts, and dynamic enough to grow with them.



## Living the Faith

*[Thriving] means to be consistent in one's intentional way of living. It includes Mass, Communion, and constant prayer to grow as an individual but also in community. It means showing up even when it isn't always easy. It means having a desire to keep coming closer to Christ and wanting to resemble him.*

—Maya, college senior

Alongside spiritual growth and a personal relationship with God, Latina/o students in the study describe thriving as the extent to which their faith shapes their everyday lives—how they *live* their faith through their daily choices, relationships, and habits.

Interviewees explain that living the faith means integrating—and, in fact, prioritizing—one's faith in everyday life.

Elena, for example, defines thriving as, “when I keep my spiritual life very ingrained in my daily life.” She elaborates:

*You know, like, making sure I'm praying in the morning and just feeling very connected in that way. It's having [my faith] be something that's a part of my daily life, and it's not something that I will forget about. Being a student is busy, but making sure that the little time that I have, I'm prioritizing [my faith] as part of my life. That's what I would qualify as thriving.*



Sharing a similar sentiment, Ariana says:

*Thriving for me is incorporating God everywhere. When you notice that you are not just working, but you are working for God . . . Thriving for me is when these things are as simple as riding a bike—it just comes up. It's natural . . . and it's very related to being able to incorporate God in your routine in a way that you don't actually need to write down, "Do my prayer," on your to-do list. It is as basic as having breakfast. It is as basic as doing your bed. When I'm doing the opposite—when I wake up and spend the whole day and I realize that I haven't talked to God—I feel more alone. I feel less capable; I feel more anxious. And this is just part of how things go.*

Several describe how thriving means practicing one's faith consistently, "even when it isn't always easy," as Maya above notes. It requires "effort," in Alejandra's words, "to see your spiritual growth." Adán says that one must "make a point to stay connected to your faith" in order to thrive. Thriving is "making time for prayer and actively pursuing God," explains Gabriel.

**In this way, thriving is a form of spiritual discipline in which students actively choose to prioritize their faith over other competing demands.**

This is especially significant (and challenging) for Latina/o college students, who often must balance academic responsibilities with work and family obligations. In fact, a quarter of Latina/o students (25%) surveyed say that making time in their busy schedules is the *biggest* challenge they face in participating in campus ministry.

Valentina, for example, says it's difficult "trying to balance academic life, work commitments, social life, along with campus ministry commitments." Celeste says that she loves "meeting great people" through campus ministry, but "I am a commuter so it is hard to get together when events are happening."

Samantha, too, is challenged by this balancing act. She shares that she can sometimes feel she has "too many homework assignments" to attend some campus

ministry events. But, Samantha says, thinking that way "was starting to impact how I show up with my faith." She decided to think of attending her Latina/o ministry group on campus as a "study break": "If I can go on my phone [during a study break], I can go to my Latino group."

Campus ministers acknowledge how busy their Latina/o students are ("Many of our Latinx students are working one or multiple jobs in addition to being full-time students, and some are also helping out at home with younger siblings or older guardians," "Many of our Latino students are commuters . . . they often have family and work obligations so they are busy"). Still, some, like Maria, challenge students to "allow God to be present" in their everyday lives by asking, "How do I bring God's wisdom and grace into my choices?"

Friendship with other students involved in ministry helps students prioritize their faith as a part of everyday life. Santiago, for example shares that he's "found a lot of great people" through campus ministry. He likes that these new friends attend Mass weekly and are "more practicing Catholic than most."

Elena echoes this when she says she appreciates having "spiritual friends" through campus ministry who "I can talk to about things, and they can keep me in check and ask me how my faith is going." Alejandra notes there's "a difference between having friends and having friends with the same faith-based values as you."

Dominic sees his campus ministry friends as spiritual role models, explaining:

*With my friends, I can take a seat back and think, "These are people living in God. This is what they do and do not act like." And it's not like, "Let me copy them," but it's like, let me use their experiences and go forth in my life, keeping in mind those things that they've gone through as fellow Christians and Catholics.*



Our survey data affirm the importance of having friends in ministry: 74% percent of the Latina/o students we surveyed say it is very important for them to find friends with other students through campus ministry. Ninety percent say their friendships are “supporting and rewarding.”

**Interviewees live their faith—or, in Zaira’s words, put it “in action”—in two additional ways: service and leadership.**

Majorities, for example, say that engaging in social outreach to poor and marginalized communities (63%) and working toward racial justice and peace (61%) are very important components of their involvement in campus ministry.

Linking service to spiritual thriving, Zaira explains:

*Thriving is getting a little bit more out there with different communities. That means going to your personal community and going to help [with] food donations, helping people understand their faith a little bit more, or just having a constant relationship with your parish—because, in my opinion, your actions mean so much more. I always say faith without action isn’t necessarily faith. For me, to be thriving in my religious life is to constantly be doing something; to be practicing what you preach.*

Mariana, too, acknowledges how service makes her faith tangible in the everyday. Through her college’s campus ministry, she began attending events in her city to serve the unhoused. “I like to give back to the community . . . that’s what drew me into [campus ministry] and started me working on being closer to my faith,” she says.

These Latina/o students often describe service not just as a responsibility but as a meaningful spiritual exercise that allows them to deepen their faith:

*I’ve learned a lot about my faith through teaching the catechism . . . there’s times they ask really hard questions and, well, I tell them every week, “Ask questions, and I’ll do my research or talk to Father Steve, and I’ll get back to you,” because I don’t know everything off the top of my head. It’s been cool to learn more.*

—Elena

Like Elena, many of the Latina/o students we interviewed and surveyed are involved in leadership roles within campus ministry. Some of the most common leadership positions include Small Group Leader, Student Peer Minister, and Liturgy Officer.

Ninety-three percent of Latina/o students say it is *moderately* or *very* important to them to develop leadership skills through their involvement in campus ministry. Eighty-one percent agree that their campus ministers truly help them develop such skills.

These insights reveal that Latina/o students consistently point to the integration of faith into their daily lives as a sign of spiritual thriving.

**Living the faith is not limited to participation in formal ministry activities—it’s sustained by spiritual friendships, reinforced through service, and deepened by leadership.**

It’s when, in Ariana’s words, “incorporating God everywhere” comes as naturally as one “has breakfast” or “makes the bed.”



## Faith *Como en Casa*

*I do really love being part of the campus ministry community. It just feels so familiar, and I think that it is really something that feels like home. I hear these people, and they speak Spanish to me, and they joke around with me in the way that my family jokes around, and they feel very culturally similar. And so, I think that is great 'cause it feels like having family and having a home away from home.*

—Elena, college junior

The final theme arising from Latina/o students' definitions of thriving is the ability to express one's faith through cultural rituals and traditions — *latinamente*, as they do *en casa*.

Expressing one's faith *como en casa* may involve celebrating feast days honoring Latin American saints; a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary; attending Spanish or bilingual Mass; or creating religious art and music that incorporates cultural imagery, to name a few.

When campus ministries incorporate these cultural expressions of faith, they shift from being a friendly place on campus to being “a home away from home,” in Elena's words. This approach to ministry helps Latina/o students feel connected to their families, heritages, and to other Latina/o students:

*The cool thing about doing stuff more culturally oriented is not only do you get to learn about other people's cultures, but then you get to learn about your own. I didn't grow up in Mexico, but if someone*

*else came in and was like, “Here, this is what I experienced in my family; this is our tradition,” I'm then like, “Oh that aligns with my family tradition.”*

—Ben

*At the end of the Mass, they were serving Puerto Rican food, and I actually felt at home. Like, every time you look at someone, everybody smiles at you and talks to you as if they know you. When you go to a place that is very different, the way you'll have to celebrate your religion is going to feel very different. But this was like home.*

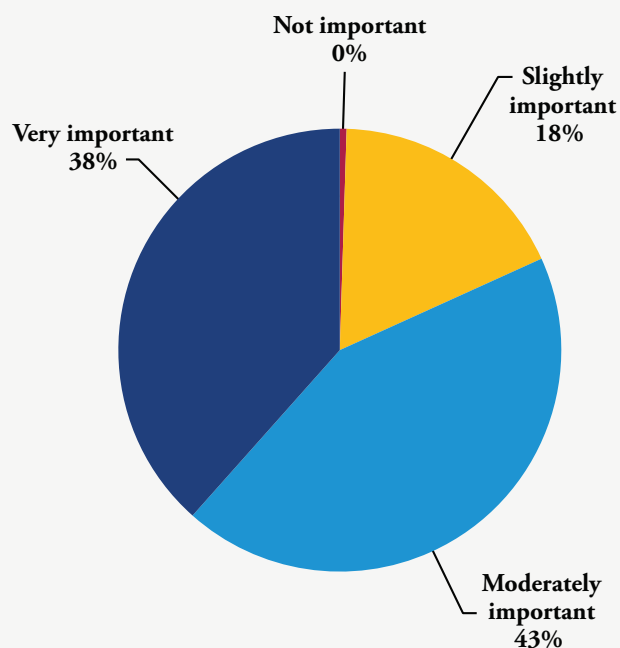
—Ariana

*I think it's really nice to see a lot of Mexicans or just Hispanic people kind of alive in the faith. It makes you feel like, you know, there are other people like me.*

—Santiago

### How important would you say your race/ethnicity is in describing who you are?

Percentage of Latina/o students responding:



Source: Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)

Many respondents—like Ben, Ariana, and Santiago—find deep meaning in and connection to their race/ethnicity.

**Most respondents (83%) say their race/ethnicity is *moderately or very important* in describing who they are.**

Just 18% say it is only *slightly* important, and no respondents say their race/ethnicity is *not at all* important in describing who they are.

Nearly all of the Latina/o students surveyed also agree (44%) or *strongly* agree (49%) that they feel proud to be Latina/o:

*Being Latino is a part of what makes me, me. And I'm proud of it.*

—Eduardo

*I'm definitely very passionate about being Latino and being American.*

—Dominic

*Being Latino is something to be proud of and to proudly represent as well.*

—Gabriel

Similar proportions say they feel proud to be Catholic: 43% of respondents say they agree with the statement, while 51% say they *strongly* agree.

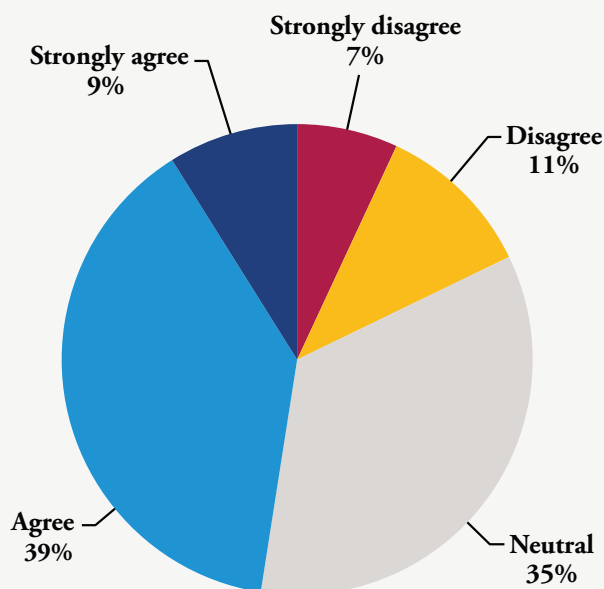
**For many of the students with whom we spoke, these identities are greatly intertwined. In fact, nearly half (47%) say that being Catholic is a *central part* of being Latina/o.**

Alejandra, for example, says her faith “is something that I consider part of my Latino culture.” Dominic shares that his Latino and Catholic identities are “definitely intertwined,” explaining that his community values “love” and being “tight knit” because it is “based around faith and around God.” Elena says that her Latinidad and her religious identity are “very connected” because Catholicism is “so ingrained in the culture and in the celebrations we do. They’re both Latino *and* Catholic. They’re very important to me.”

Respondents desire and appreciate efforts by their campus ministries to acknowledge the importance of these often-entwined identities by providing Spanish, bilingual, and culturally relevant programming services. “There’s something about having service in one’s language that allows this connection to be made,” says Maya, adding that it is “not a determinant to one’s access to Christ . . . but can play a role in sense of belonging in community.”

### To what extent do you agree or disagree that being Catholic is a central part of being Latina/o?

Percentage of Latina/o students responding:



Source: Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)

When asked what resources campus ministers could provide to help her thrive on campus, Yasmin shares:

*I want a campus ministry that . . . understands our cultural experiences—especially those of us who are here yet are reminded by laws [and] political rhetoric that we are not from here—that accepts and embraces my full identity and shared Imago Dei.*

Elena says that culturally responsive ministry has helped her “feel more connected” to her Catholic and cultural identities and “a lot more confident” in general. Itzel, too, shares:

*I feel like I’ve gotten more in contact with my heritage because of campus ministry. I realized that you can’t really be Latina without having religion. So many of our traditions center around religion. And if you take religion out of your life, what’s left?*

Reflecting their desire to deepen their faith and honor their family’s cultural heritage, **a majority (53%) say that learning about Latina/o theologies and religious traditions through campus ministries is very important.** Eighty percent of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that campus ministers should make an effort to understand and celebrate Latina/o cultures and traditions.

Campus ministers recognize the importance of culturally responsive ministry—“Students should be encouraged to express their faith experience from a Latino point of view so others may grow from it,” “I speak little Spanish, yet value the need for students to pray in their first language”—but many express uncertainty about how best to implement it:

*I am not Latina and don’t do specifically Latino ministry and, so it’s hard to know how to be intentional without being targeting.*

—Heather

*[My biggest challenge is] integrating Latino spirituality with the more dominant Catholic spirituality and the one I grew up with. Even though my Spanish is good [enough] to be able to communicate, celebrate the sacraments and preach, I do not have much cultural immersion having learned Spanish in Spain.*

—Fr. Jim

*[I’m challenged by] rethinking the traditional—in other words, white—ways of campus ministry to best serve the variety of Latino students on campus.*

—Amy

*I don’t speak Spanish. I don’t know Latino cultures well enough to incorporate it into programs.*

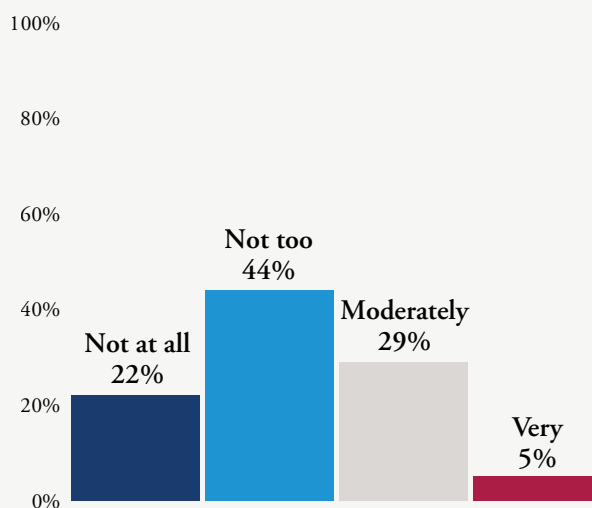
—Sara

*It’s tough to figure out ministry with Latine students as a white person. I have some work and community experience with the Hispanic immigrant community—which isn’t the same as the first-gen US Latine community—and I’m not always sure how to talk with students about pieces of Latine experience that I’m familiar with.*

—Penny

### How focused is your campus ministry currently on teaching students about Latina/o theologies and religious traditions?

*Percentages of campus ministers responding:*



**Source:** Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=75)



Others share how structural factors constrain their ability to do this work:

*We have nowhere near the number of Latinx faculty and staff we should have for our proportion of Latinx students, and they often struggle with belonging.*

—Megan

*We see the need for ministry to be done primarily or only in Spanish, but we cannot fully facilitate that because we do not have the support from supervisors. From an administrative standpoint, this has been the biggest hurdle.*

—Natalia

*We have too small of an office to run entirely Latino-specific services or programs.*

—Riley

**These cultural and structural barriers may, in part, explain why most campus ministers (66%) say their ministries are not *at all* or not *too* focused on teaching students about Latina/o theologies and religious traditions.**

Despite these challenges, over three-quarters of Latina/o students (77%) say their campus ministers already do a good job of valuing and celebrating Latina/o cultures and traditions in ministerial services and programs. Eighty-two percent agree that their campus ministers see their racial/ethnic identities as strengths.

About a third of students (32%) report their campus ministry offers weekly services or programs in Spanish, and about half (49%) say there are weekly bilingual services or programs. Under half (46%) say their campus ministry incorporates Latina/o cultures and traditions on at least a weekly basis.

Students are divided in opinion about the frequency of Spanish services. About half (49%) say Spanish programming is offered about as much as they would like while 42% say it is offered less or much less than they would like.





For some students, being able to hear a homily or pray with peers in Spanish is meaningful and impactful:

*I feel like my connection to God is a lot deeper and feels a lot more present when I am praying in Spanish or I'm experiencing Mass in Spanish. Praying to God in Spanish feels like I'm talking to my parents. In English, I'm talking to some guy up in the sky—he's just some dude to me in English. In Spanish, that's my Father. That is who I grew up knowing because of the language.*

—Lily

Yet not all Latina/o students speak Spanish. Some, for example, are of Brazilian heritage and speak Portuguese instead. Others are second-generation or beyond and speak limited to no Spanish.

While about half (49%) say they can express themselves equally well in Spanish as in English, nearly 4 in 10 Latina/o students (39%) surveyed report speaking *mostly* or *only* English at home with their families. For these students, Spanish-only services can be a source of alienation and shame.

*To be Hispanic, one doesn't need to know Spanish. To say that one does hurts those who were never taught, and this is a type of bigotry.*

—Kevin

*Sometimes it can feel like, "Where do I really belong?" Because I go back to Mexico and I'm like, "Oh, this is really cool; this is a part of me." But at the same time, I'm not very fluent in Spanish . . . So, then that's like, "Oh, I'm not really from here, you know?"*

—Eduardo

*I've been trying to create a group chat with [Latinal/os on campus], but people are more comfortable with those who understand them more. I think being Brazilian here—it's very trying to find a community. Even though I'm in the Catholic community, and even though there are a lot of Latinas, they [have] totally different experiences. And in some conversations, I may be left out or I'll be like trying to understand what is going on, but it's in Spanish . . .*

—Ariana

A greater percentage of respondents (58%) say they are satisfied with the frequency of *bilingual* services, saying these services occur as much as they would like; 37% say it occurs less or *much* less often than they would like.

### Does your campus ministry \_\_\_\_\_ less than you would like, about as much as you would like, or more than you would like?

Percentages of Latina/o students responding:

● Less ● About as much ● More

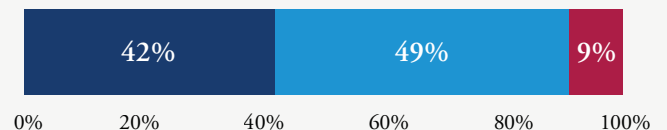
#### Incorporate Latina/o cultures and traditions:



#### Offer bilingual services or programs:



#### Offer Spanish services or programs:



**Note:** We combined the categories “less” with “much less,” and “more” with “much more” for clarity.

**Source:** Springtide Research Institute and Dominican University 2024 Study of Latina/o Students in Catholic Campus Ministries (n=57)

Overall, faith *como en casa* highlights the way spiritual thriving is linked to cultural belonging for many of these Latina/o students. When campus ministries incorporate cultural expressions of faith, students feel at home on campus and within themselves. At the same time, students' diverse backgrounds—including language fluency, national origins, and generational status—mean there is no one-size-fits-all approach

to culturally responsive ministry. Campus ministers are often aware of these complexities and express a deep desire to accompany students well, even as they navigate cultural gaps or institutional barriers. Still, the impact of these efforts is clear: Latina/o students overwhelmingly say they feel their cultures and identities are respected in campus ministry spaces.



# Practicing Faith Como en Casa

In reading the stories shared by Latina/o college students in this report, Saint Irenaeus's adage comes to mind: **"The Glory of God is a human being fully alive."** The heart of these stories reveals that our Latina/o student yearn to be "fully alive" on our campuses, in our communities, and in the world—*latinamente*—in a way that intentionally integrates their culture, faith practices, and daily lived realities.

How do we accompany our Latina/o students to be "fully alive" and thrive in their faith lives?

As a Latino Director of Campus Ministry at a Catholic Hispanic-Serving Institution, I find myself approaching the question of "how" by asking students *"why?"*—*"What is your why?"* I often hear responses like, *"mi comunidad," "mi familia," "un mejor futuro"*—my community, my family, and a better future. What if campus ministry began there—from the sacred ground of the questions, dreams, hopes, and even fears that our Latina/o students carry onto our campuses? What if we journeyed with our students to co-create spaces in the company of friends where they come to discover their own theological voices—ones that empower students to express and engage their faith in everyday life?

Developing a culturally responsive and sustaining campus ministry requires deep listening and pastoral creativity in the following ways:

- **Centering Latina/o theological frameworks and traditions.** You may, for example, facilitate a bilingual Rosary among students or celebrate the feast days of Latin American saints. Latina/o students in this study shared that events like these can foster pride in their identities, deepen their faith, and strengthen their sense of belonging on campus and within campus ministry.

- **Cultivating intentional spaces for Latina/o students to engage in theological reflection as they discover God in their own stories, lived experiences, and realities.** Have students reflect on where and when they noticed God throughout the week—in a conversation, nature, a challenge, or a moment of joy. Offer Bible studies or topical discussions (e.g., on ethics, relationships, or social justice) that connect Church teachings to Latina/o college students' experiences. Ensure these discussions are open and non-judgmental spaces where students can feel free to ask questions.
- **Integrating embodied experiences of Latina/o aesthetics in programming through poetry, music, visual arts, dance and other cultural expressions.** Art and music can be powerful means by which Latina/o students connect to and explore their faith and culture on a personal level.

The voices of the Latina/o students in this study serve as a call to engage them in formative experiences where thriving can emerge and be named. As we have heard from these students, this means creating a community in which they can authentically explore, honor, and celebrate the fullness who they are. When we begin with their *"why,"* we walk with students toward a deeper encounter with their faith—affirming that which makes them *"humans fully alive"* and calling forth their leadership in the Church and our society.



**Andrew J. Mercado**

Director of University Ministry at Dominican University.



## Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Latina/o students in Catholic campus ministries understand spiritual thriving, including how those understandings align or diverge from those of campus ministers. What began as an observation in a conference assessment survey evolved into a broader investigation of how Latina/o students define and live out their faith.

**Across surveys and interviews, we found that Latina/o students and campus ministers often share a deep commitment to students' faith lives but approach thriving from different angles.**

Ministers tended to emphasize visible, communal forms of engagement—regular participation in the sacraments, involvement in campus ministry, and a mature relationship with God. Students, by contrast, described thriving as a more personal, evolving process, one marked by spiritual exploration, a relationship with God, the integration of faith into daily life, and expressions of Catholicism rooted in cultural and familial traditions.

Rather than viewing these as competing definitions, this study suggests that they reflect different vantage points shaped by culture, context, and institutional norms.

Campus ministers play a vital role in creating environments where this kind of faith can grow. Time and time again, the Latina/o students in this study shared stories of times when ministers fostered trust, normalized doubt, and celebrated the cultural identities and traditions that students brought to campus with them. In this way, campus ministers became trusted guides and companions on students' spiritual and academic journeys.

As Catholic campus ministries continue to accompany a growing number of Latina/o students, this study affirms the importance of acknowledging and responding to the diverse realities on campus. It offers an opportunity to reflect on spiritual thriving and how one may engage with diverse conceptions of it. The goal is thus not to redefine what it means to spiritually thrive, but to recognize the many ways young people already understand themselves to be living it out.



# Endnotes

1. Maureen J. Day and Linda M. Kawentel. “A National Qualitative Study on Catholic Campus Ministry.” A report prepared for the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Catholic Education*, 2020. <https://www.usccb.org/resources/19-051-Campus-Ministry-Report.pdf>
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future.” *NCCB/USCC*, November 1985. <https://www.usccb.org/committees/catholic-education/empowered-spirit-history-and-current-opportunities>
3. Culturally sustaining ministry refers to a model of pastoral care that honors and preserves the cultural identities of Latina/o students. It affirms their religious, linguistic, and communal traditions through ministry practices that reflect their lived experiences. It reflects a shift from merely “welcoming” diversity to deeply embedding cultural continuity in ministry—fostering spiritual belonging, thriving, and leadership that reflects the unique gifts of Latina/o students.
4. Lauren Mora. “Hispanic enrollment reaches new high at four-year colleges in the U.S., but affordability remains an obstacle.” *Pew Research Center*, October 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/>
5. Jens Manuel Krogstand, Joshua Alvarado, and Besheer Mohamed. “Among U.S. Latinos, Catholicism Continues to Decline but Is Still the Largest Faith.” *Pew Research Center*, April 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latino-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/>
6. Federal legislation defines Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) as a degree-granting, non-profit college or university where at least 25% of the full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate student body is Latina/o.



## Acknowledgements

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## About the Contributors



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## About Springtide Research Institute

Springtide Research Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that engages the power of social science to learn from and about young people ages 13 to 25. Our empirical data amplify the voices of young people, inform those who know and serve them, and lead the way in showing what's next. An expression of a 300-year-old movement of educators founded by Jean Baptiste de La Salle, our work draws inspiration from De La Salle's passion for building communities oriented toward the good of young people, especially those on the margins.

## About the PASOS Network at Dominican University

The PASOS Network is a national community of praxis that transforms higher education institutions to cultivate *un protagonismo* for the Church and society through culturally sustaining practices rooted in the faith traditions of Latine students and the communities from which they come. It fosters collegiality and creativity amongst Catholic institutions, especially those who are concerned with doing culturally responsive work through every practice that touches faith, justice, and Catholic identity.



## PASOS Network at Dominican University

### Advancing the Practice of Culturally Sustaining Ministry in Higher Education

Founded in 1901 by the Dominicans Sisters of Sinsinawa, Dominican University began as a women's college with a deep commitment to social justice through a rigorous Catholic and liberal arts education. Over a century later, Dominican University continues the legacy of the original founders by serving primarily first-generation and immigrant-origin students.

Since 2011, Dominican University has been federally designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). As a premier Catholic Hispanic Serving Institution in the Midwest, an evolving, dynamic question is at the heart of our mission: how do we celebrate and sustain the Catholic and Hispanic dimensions of our institution and other institutions that are being reshaped by the presence and contributions of Latina/o students and the communities from which they come.

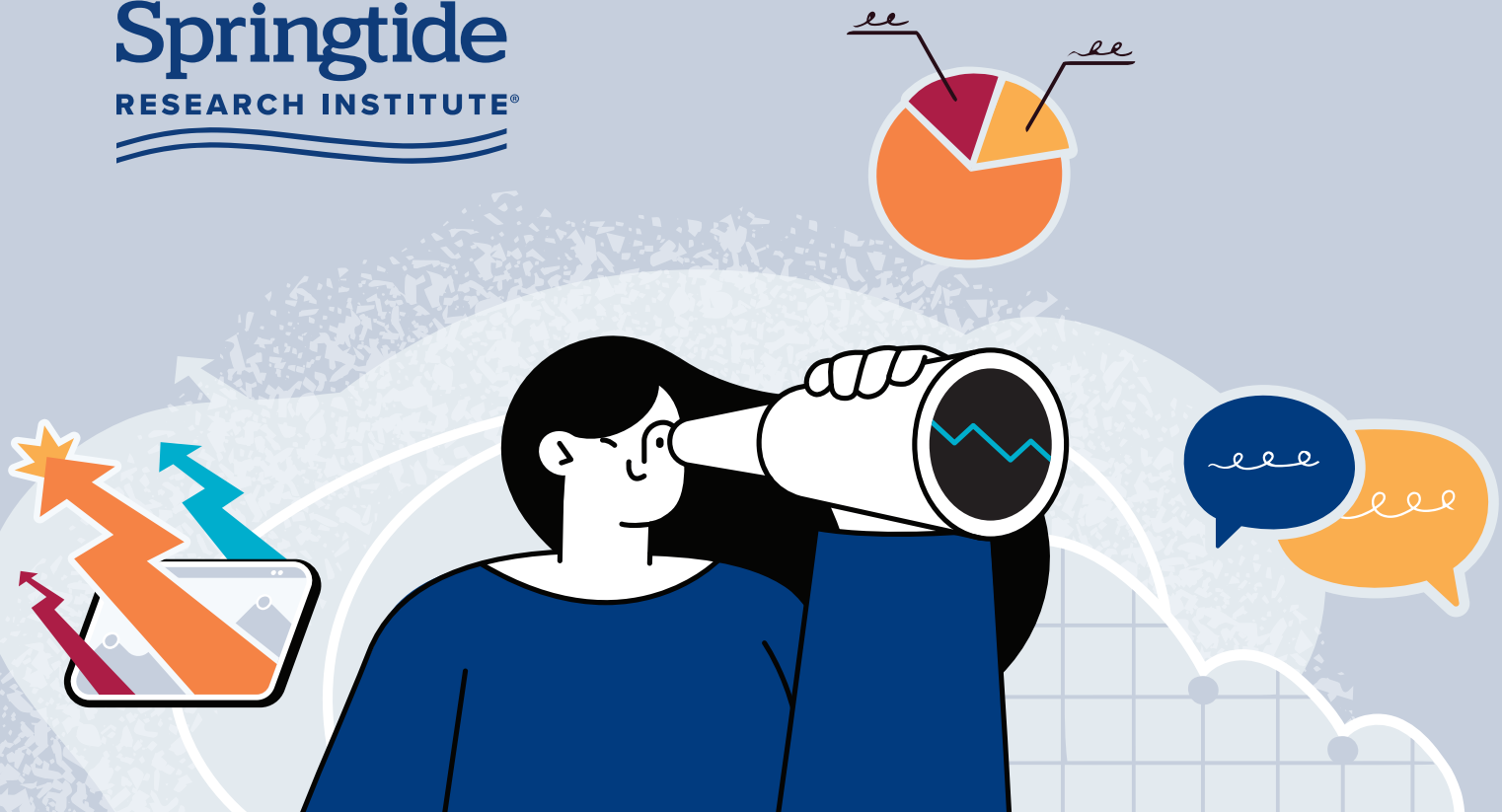
As a response to this question, the PASOS Network was established in 2022 as a unit within the Division of Mission and Ministry at Dominican University. The PASOS Network aspires to transform the landscape of higher education into a fertile ground for the preparation of Latina/o students to become active ecclesial agents in the academy, Church, and society. Rooted in deep theological and ministerial traditions and mediated by the cultural and social capital of Latina/o students, the PASOS Network prepares college students to exercise their protagonismo.

Anchored in a synodal vision, the PASOS Network aims to accompany committed practitioners—campus ministers, theologians, and university administrators—in identifying and strengthening faith-informed intercultural competency.



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