

At conservative Wyoming Catholic College, students read great books and ride horses

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Wyoming Catholic College has a lot of unusual things about it, each enough to merit a story in itself.

The small 180-student college, the only Roman Catholic college in the state of Wyoming, has a set four-year curriculum built around the "great books." It has a required outdoor leadership and horsemanship program.

A perhaps one-of-its-kind [technology policy](#) ^[1] restricts internet access in dorm rooms and prohibits students from carrying cellphones on campus.

And Wyoming Catholic College is one of a very small group of religious colleges that [declines to accept federal financial aid](#) ^[2], partly out of concerns that accepting the funds could impair its ability to set its own policies around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Wyoming Catholic opened its doors in fall 2007, one of a group of conservative Catholic colleges that started around the same time, bursting into the market by emphasizing a strong Catholic identity and attention to students' spiritual formation.

All Catholic faculty at Wyoming Catholic [make a public profession of faith and take an oath of fidelity](#) ^[3], while non-Catholic faculty pledge their respect to the Catholic Church and its teaching authority.

All students are subject to [a code of conduct](#) ^[4] that bars drug and alcohol use on campus, imposes a dress code and a 10:30 p.m. weekday curfew, and prohibits visitation between the sexes in student residence halls. Wyoming Catholic, like many religious colleges, holds that sexual activity outside the confines of a marriage between a man and a woman contradicts the teachings of the church. Unlike what would be at the case of other many Catholic institutions, violating that standard would be cause for serious disciplinary action.

"If there were a faculty member who was living out of wedlock with someone, that would be grounds for firing; the students could be expelled if we found out about sexual relations outside marriage -- that's part of what we understand our Catholic identity to entail," said Glenn C. Arbery, Wyoming Catholic's president.

Not everyone will share that understanding or that identity. But for those who do, they will find a highly distinctive rural college that takes full advantage of, one could say, God's grandeur.

The college experience at Wyoming Catholic starts with a three-week backpacking trip in the Rocky Mountains, what the college [calls](#) ^[5] "the most unusual and meaningful orientation program in the country." Each year, students participate in two separate "outdoor weeks," short courses in outdoors skills: courses have been held in backpacking, canoeing or sea kayaking, canyoneering, fishing, horse packing, ice climbing, mountain biking, mountaineering, rock climbing, skiing, or whitewater rafting and kayaking. All students participate in the equestrian program.

The great books-focused curriculum has eight tracks: humanities, theology, philosophy, math/science, fine arts, Latin, Trivium and leadership. All students take the same courses. There are no electives, though Arbery said

opportunities to specialize come when students do a project on an author of their choice junior year and when they complete a senior thesis.

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them habits, or what Aristotle talks about are virtues. Virtues of courage or temperance.”
Courtesy of Wyoming Catholic College

Arbery, a literature scholar, said the outdoor curriculum complements the book-based one. He taught Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* earlier this semester with his wife, also a professor at the college. They were discussing a scene where Melville describes the rope used to tie the harpoon.

“When we were talking about this, one of the seniors started talking about rock climbing and the way you use ropes,” Arbery recalled. “It was instantly accessible to them in a way that was not just theoretical, but it’s a felt and known experience.”

“It’s also a moral training for the students in Aristotle’s sense,” Arbery said of the outdoor program. “You don’t go out and just tell them what’s good and what’s bad, but they have to become more aware of their acts when they’re out in the wilderness, learning to control their hunger, how to ration themselves in terms of energy or food, or how to address their fear. If they’re doing something that is at first terrifying to them such as rock climbing, how do you overcome your fear of heights? All of these things are constantly calling on the resources of the students and helping to give

Wyoming Catholic originally planned to build its campus on a donated ranch, but it discarded those plans as financially unfeasible and is now developing its campus in downtown Lander, Wyo., a city of about 7,500. The ranch is on the market for about \$1.6 million. Meanwhile the college uses it to graze cattle -- the source of beef for the cafeteria.

As for the college’s famed technology policy, Arbery said the ban on smartphones had to be suspended for the fall semester because problems with landline phone and internet service made it necessary to permit students keep their smartphones in their dorm rooms. But he said the ban will be back in place after the holiday break.

“It’s kind of radical,” he said of the policy. “It really works well. It makes the students present in their classes in ways that I have not seen elsewhere.”

From Wyoming to (Off-)Broadway

Wyoming Catholic was fictionalized in a hit Off-Broadway play written by none other than Glenn Arbery’s son, the playwright Will Arbery.^[6]

Heroes of the Fourth Turning recently concluded its run at New York’s Playwrights Horizons theater. The play, which attracted praise from secular and conservative Catholic critics alike -- the critic for *The New York Times* called it “astonishing”^[7] -- is set at the fictional Transfiguration College, located in a 7,000-person town in

Wyoming. One of the characters is the college president's daughter. The characters debate President Trump, abortion, gender identity and more, their views representing a range of conservative Catholic social thought, unanswered by a liberal or secular counterpoint.

Will Arbery told an interviewer for the public radio show *On Point* ^[8] that "for nonconservative critics who are coming to see it -- a lot of their experience has to do with hearing these views go uncontested. And just having to sit with that, and sit with characters who you come to care about."

Glenn Arbery wrote a blog entry ^[9] after seeing his son's play. He is a proud dad, albeit somewhat of a conflicted one. The play is very personal for him.

"What's most amazing about it, in many ways, is that it gives a strong voice to the Catholic positions articulated by the characters," Arbery wrote.

"Wyoming Catholic College is fictionalized in the play, but what we do here -- what we think about daily -- is in fact as centrally important to the broader culture as this play makes it feel."

"This college is engaged in deep ways with the agony of a culture that has lost its spiritual center, and his play has brought an articulate and deeply felt conversation before audiences unlikely ever to suspect that there is really another side, not to mention a threshold for charity," he wrote.

Federal Funding

The countercultural nature of a place like Wyoming Catholic can be seen in its decision not to participate in the federal student aid program after it gained candidacy status from its accreditor in 2014, making it eligible for federal funding (Wyoming Catholic gained initial accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission in 2018).

Kevin Roberts, the president in 2015 when the board announced its decision to forgo federal funding, told Wyoming Public Media ^[10] at the time, "The strings attached to that money would allow the federal government to invoke an interpretation of Title IX" -- the federal law prohibiting gender discrimination at colleges -- "in particular concerning transgendered persons and people with a same-sex attraction who want to bring a certain activity or activism to our college -- either as students, or as employees -- or -- and this is very troubling for us -- even people who want to use our restroom facilities and dorms."

"It's difficult ground," Arbery, the current president, said of what the college fears accepting federal funding could open it up to. "It mostly has to do with the sense that there is a kind of agenda in terms of gender identity. Our traditional character is very much geared towards man and woman, heterosexual relations, not much sympathy with the transgender position and things like that. Those are the kinds of issues that come up that we hope to avoid if there should be some pressure from the government for us to do something. There's every indication that there would be. There's a lawsuit now against the Little Sisters of the Poor ^[11] trying to make them offer contraceptives and abortions to employees. That's ridiculous. It's an infringement on religious liberty, and that's really the line that we don't think we can cross."

The decision not to accept federal funding put Wyoming Catholic in the perhaps unenviable position of acting as a loan servicer, allowing students to pay back their tuition -- tuition, room and board, and other costs of attendance are currently set at \$32,300 ^[12] -- after they graduate. It has mostly worked: the college reports that since its inception it issued loans to 362 students and 195 parents -- 557 people in total -- and that of that number only four people have defaulted.

"But you can see what kinds of cash flow position that puts us in," Arbery said. "We're having to pay faculty, feed and house the students, and where's the cash coming from? It's not coming from up-front money we

would get if they had federal loans."

Arbery said the college has entered into a new arrangement with a credit union that agreed to consolidate Wyoming Catholic's debt and offer student loans to all students who gain acceptance, regardless of their credit scores, starting in the 2020-21 academic year. Loans will be at 5.25 to 6 percent interest rate, slightly higher than the current 4.53 percent rate ^[13] for federal student loans. Interest will accrue during college.

The college expects that the arrangement will make available \$725,000 to \$800,000 in cash -- rather than "IOUs" -- at the beginning of each academic year.

"We think it will be a kind of opportunity and model for other colleges that want to avoid, if possible, the entanglements and the obligations that go along with taking federal funding," Arbery said of the arrangement.

The Catholic College Context

Wyoming Catholic opened its doors at the same time as a few other institutions ^[14] that also emphasized a conservative Catholic character. The fates of the various institutions show the difficulties of opening a small private college in the 21st century.

The University of Sacramento, which was associated with a religious order, the Legionaries of Christ, an order that faced difficulties after allegations of sexual abuse against the order's late founder ^[15], closed in 2011.

Southern Catholic College, in Georgia, which also had a Legionaries of Christ affiliation ^[16], closed in 2010, after five years.

"The market crash really dried up fundraising," said Tom Clements, Southern Catholic's founder and first chairman of the board. Still, he has no regrets: "Because we were a pioneer school, we've had several pioneering people who started their own businesses. One started a Catholic grade school. Many of them became the Catholic leaders in different institutions -- the principal of a high school, multiple teachers of theology. Many became the director of the religious education at their parish. The fruits were great."

Other colleges that opened around the same time as Wyoming Catholic persevered. John Paul the Great Catholic University, a niche college in California with an academic focus on entertainment media, enrolls about 300 undergraduates. Ave Maria University, a Florida institution established with a big gift ^[17] from the Domino's Pizza founder, last spring graduated its 15th class ^[18], its largest ever, with of 248 undergraduates and 11 more students receiving graduate degrees in theology.

At times these colleges have positioned themselves in oppositional ways ^[19] to other Catholic institutions, suggesting they're more Catholic than other colleges that they say have secularized. Indeed, that is arguably their *raison d'être*.

"These colleges were founded because they don't think that the ones that exist say they do the job they say they do," said William Portier, a professor of theology at the University of Dayton.

"It's like a battle of the brands," Portier said. "There's a big battle for the brand Catholic, who gets to be called it."

The Reverend Dennis H. Holtschneider, the president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities -- which does not count Wyoming Catholic as a member --

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said there's a great range of colleges that fall under the Catholic umbrella.

"American higher education has really interesting boutique kinds of schools," he said. "Berea [College]" -- a no-tuition college where every student has a work commitment -- "is one of those. Bard at Simon's Rock, which takes high school-age kids into college, Bennington, which got rid of majors. You've got some schools which are great books-based, like St. John's."



"The Catholics have schools like those, too. These are schools that are incredibly focused on creating a very strong, robust Catholic culture inside the organization as part of not just educating students but forming them. They do that in interesting ways. Wyoming does it with horses and with outdoor certification and with great books education. Those are not the heart of it -- the heart of it is this faith-based education."

Father Holtschneider said colleges like Wyoming Catholic are "addressing a deep-felt need in the market, but these are also very small schools. Most of them are measuring their students in the hundreds. Most Catholic universities are more like Catholic hospitals or Catholic social service agencies; they're not [just] for Catholics. One out of six Americans ^[20] get their health care from Catholic hospitals. Catholic schools aren't only for Catholic children, and certainly Catholic charities don't just serve people who are poor who are Catholic. Most of our institutions are serving very large populations to make a difference in the larger world, and to bring a Catholic sensibility and sense of mission and identity within the larger mission of educating people for that world."

Arbery said he sees Wyoming Catholic's peer colleges as other Catholic liberal arts or great books colleges -- Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts and Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, both in New Hampshire; Christendom College in Virginia; and Thomas Aquinas College, in California -- as well as somewhat larger institutions like the University of Dallas (his alma mater), Benedictine College and Franciscan University of Steubenville. All are colleges endorsed by the Cardinal Newman Society ^[21], an organization that advocates for institutions it sees as promoting a "faithful Catholic education" and which has not been shy over the years about calling out Catholic colleges ^[22] it thinks have strayed from the mission.

Patrick Reilly, the president of the Cardinal Newman Society, said the society recommends Wyoming Catholic and the other colleges on its list "because they are sincerely and deliberately Catholic."

"Outside of the whole Catholic question, I think one of the real interesting things about Wyoming Catholic is the niche that it has found," Reilly added. "I think that in a market of higher education that's highly competitive and getting more competitive that institutions finding a particular niche, finding a particular way of defining themselves and standing out from the crowd, is clearly very important. Not only is Wyoming Catholic very strongly Catholic, which certainly stands out, but its location, its emphasis on an outdoors program and developing leadership skills and familiarity with the environment of Wyoming is just something that's very attractive to a lot of students, and it works very well with the great books program. It provides an opportunity for reflection and for getting away from technology and being in a place where you can really focus on beauty and the transcendental realities that are awfully difficult to pay attention to when you're at an East Coast university where there are a million different technologies and a whole city around it."

"I think almost all of them come here because of our Catholic identity," Arbery said of what brings students to Wyoming Catholic.

"I think most of them are attracted in some major way to our outdoor program, or to what they perceive as a distinctive difference, which is that we emphasize the poetic imagination much more so than some other colleges do. We're sort of adventurous and poetic" -- he paused -- "and Catholic."

Religious Colleges ^[23]

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Links

[1] <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/student-life/technology-policy>

[2] <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/support/federal-funding/>

[3] <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/about/catholicity/>

[4] <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/student-life/code-of-conduct/>

[5] <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/new-class-2023/>

[6] <http://willarbery.com/>

[7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/theater/heroes-of-the-fourth-turning-review.html>

[8] <http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2019/11/04/catholics-trump-heroes-of-the-fourth-turning-will-arbery>

[9] [http://www.icontact-archive.com/archive?](http://www.icontact-archive.com/archive?c=412348&f=50902&s=91485&m=2202981&t=77ab7ae0eca4355c6145d73e32bcc7870e1252dd853c8841f3bb1a33efcbb9ab)

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[10] <https://www.wyomingpublicmedia.org/post/wyoming-catholic-college-says-no-federal-student-loans>

[11] <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/little-sisters-of-the-poor-to-defend-contraception-exception-against-lawsuits-24020>

[12] <http://wyomingcatholic.edu/admissions/tuition/>

[13] <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/loans/interest-rates>

[14] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/09/25/catholic-character>

[15] <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/07/world/legionaries-of-christ-denounce-founder-marcial-maciel-degollado.html>

[16] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/southern_catholic_college_announces_abrupt_closure_cites_lack_of_funds

[17] <http://www.avemaria.edu/campus/about-ave-maria/#history>

[18] <https://www.avemaria.edu/ave-maria-universitys-2019-commencement-marks-15th-graduating-class/>

[19] <http://www.avemaria.edu/christopher-p-ice-elected-as-the-third-president-of-ave-maria-university/>

[20] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/health/catholic-hospitals-procedures.html>

[21] <https://newmansociety.org/the-newman-guide/recommended-colleges/>

[22] <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/cardinal-newman-society-takes-watchdog-role-catholic-identity>

[23] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/religious-colleges>