

**NATIONAL RELIGIOUS
VOCATION CONFERENCE
NRVC.NET**

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**High educational debt a growing threat to religious vocations
Study reveals candidates turned away because of student loans**

Chicago, Feb. 22, 2012: A new study on Catholic vocations reveals that educational debt is derailing the dreams of young people to become religious sisters, brothers, or priests. And the problem is likely to get worse: Religious institutes report an increase in the number of inquirers with large educational debt and national averages show record levels of student debt continuing to rise.

The 2012 *Study on Educational Debt and Vocations to Religious Life*, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA) for the Chicago-based National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), finds that seven in ten institutes (69 percent) turned away at least one person because of student loans. In addition, many religious communities ask young people to delay their applications to enter because of educational debt.

“For those entering religious life, the expectation is that they be debt-free,” says Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, Executive Director of NRVC, “but for graduates in today’s economy, where education costs have risen by 900 percent since 1978, paying off loans can take years to accomplish. The burden of student debt has become a serious problem for religious communities desirous of welcoming younger members.”

Of approximately 15,000 serious inquiries to men’s and women’s religious institutes in the past 10 years, one in three (32 percent) involved a person with educational debt averaging \$28,000, a figure slightly higher than the \$25,000 national average.

The majority of communities (two in three) show a willingness to work with candidates with educational debt—and some 42 percent of responding institutes assume educational debt for a least some of those who apply to enter their communities.

But, the study indicates, the practice of assuming debt places a heavy and growing financial burden on religious communities. Those applying to enter religious life during the past 10 years carried \$3 million in educational debt, and if national trends continue, that overall student debt load will likely rise by 5 percent annually.

Men and women whose educational debt is delaying their entrance into a religious community often develop creative strategies for paying off their loans, such as online candy sales, marathon runs, or bingo fundraisers.

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Several philanthropic organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus and individual donors or patrons of the institutes, also provide assistance with educational debt. But the study finds that no national vehicle exists for redressing the burden of educational debt on religious vocations.

“Because religious sisters, brothers, and priests are vital to the life of the church and provide great service to society,” says Bednarczyk: “we plan to bring together key stakeholders to develop strategies to ease this significant and growing barrier to religious vocations.”

In response to the study, the NRVC is also producing a handbook on best practices for communities working with inquirers and candidates who have educational debt. The study finds that three in ten religious institutes have no policy or accepted practice for dealing with educational debt, and another 15 percent say their policy needs updating.

The study was funded by a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Complete results are available at www.nrvc.net.

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The [National Religious Vocation Conference \(NRVC\)](#) was founded in 1988 as a professional organization of men and women committed to vocation awareness, invitation, and discernment to consecrated life as brothers, sisters, and priests. The NRVC has approximately 1,100 members, most of whom are vocation ministers for religious congregations. The NRVC serves its members by providing continuing education, resources, and services for professional growth.

The [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate \(CARA\)](#) is a national, nonprofit, Georgetown University-affiliated research center that conducts social-scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission: to increase the Church's self-understanding; serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers; and advance scholarly research on religion.

The [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#), based in Los Angeles, is a philanthropic trust established to provide funds to nonprofit organizations working to improve the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people throughout the world. Supporting Catholic sisters is one of the foundation's ten priority areas.