Founded in 1843 in Worcester, Massachusetts, Holy Cross is the oldest Catholic college in New England. A National Liberal Arts College, it has more than 2,900 undergraduates, more than most other liberal arts schools across the United States. Among the top 50 National Liberal Arts Colleges, as ranked in U.S. News, Holy Cross is the highest-ranked school (32nd) that has a religious affiliation. Exclusively an undergraduate college, Holy Cross is also one of the smallest Jesuit institutions in the country. Only Spring Hill College (AL) and Wheeling Jesuit University (WV) have fewer students. An all-male school until 1975, Holy Cross’ enrollment is now 52 percent female.

Holy Cross is cross-shopped most often against Boston College, a larger (9,100 undergraduates) and more comprehensive Jesuit university, as well as Notre Dame and Georgetown, both among the most selective Catholic universities in the U.S. It is also considered versus New England liberal arts colleges such as Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Trinity and Wesleyan. A member of the Patriot League, a NCAA Division 1 (scholarship) athletic conference for several sports, Holy Cross is also likely to be considered against league rivals Bucknell, Colgate and Lafayette; these three are also liberal arts colleges.

Jesuit schools across the country, including Boston College, Fordham and Saint Joseph’s (PA) have evolved from regional into national institutions. To date, Holy Cross attracts 40 percent of its student body from outside New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont), with 48 states represented. With the help of its alumni base, Holy Cross recruits quite aggressively in the larger cities in other regions of the country. Between 55 and 60 percent of the student body is Catholic; approximately half graduated from Catholic high schools.

It’s getting tougher to get into Holy Cross. While 43 percent of the students who applied to enter the freshman class in 2014 were offered admission, the acceptance rate for 2015 dropped to 37 percent. Only eight students were accepted off the wait list, according to the college’s 2015-16 Common Data Set. A positive sign of interest: of approximately 1,300 students wait listed, nearly 500 accepted a spot on the list. Between 25 and 30 percent of a class was admitted through Early Decision, including recruited athletes. Approximately one quarter of the student body competes in varsity sports, though not all of the athletes are on scholarship.

Holy Cross is a test-optional school; a significant percentage of accepted students did not submit scores. Only 44 percent of the class that entered in 2015 submitted SAT scores; only 22 percent submitted ACT scores, according to the college’s 2015-16 Common Data Set. Among those who submitted SAT scores, the middle 50 percent of the class scored between 1220 and 1380 (out of 1600). Among those who submitted
ACT results, the middle 50 percent for the Composite was between 28 and 31. For those who score 600 or higher on each section of the SAT, it is neither to the advantage nor the detriment of a student to submit scores. The same is true for students who score at least 28 on each section of the ACT.

Students who commit to Holy Cross usually stay there. The freshman retention rate for the classes that entered in 2014 and 2015 was 96 percent, about the same as many exceptionally selective colleges and universities, including Ivy League schools. Nearly everyone finishes on time. The most recent four-year graduation rate is 89 percent, better than most colleges and universities of any size, also including some Ivy League schools.

**Costs**

Holy Cross is very expensive. Tuition and fees for 2015-16 were approximately $47,200. Room and board charges were approximately $12,700. However, the college commits to meeting 100 percent of demonstrated financial need. Virtually all scholarships, aside from athletic grants in aid, are need based. For the class that entered in 2015, among the students found to be qualified for aid, according to the college’s 2015-16 Common Data Set, 85 percent received need-based scholarships that averaged just over $38,000. The nine merit-based awards averaged over $48,000.

The average indebtedness of students who graduated in 2014 and had to take out loans was approximately $28,400, according to the Project on Student Debt. That’s $1,400 more than the maximum a student could borrow over four years from the Federal Stafford Student Loan program. 59 percent of the class graduated with student loan debt. 15 percent had to borrow from a source other than the Federal Government.

Holy Cross had an endowment of approximately $721 million in FY 2015, according to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, large for a school of this size, especially one that grants only bachelors degrees. The college’s endowment is actually larger than Fordham’s, an older and larger Jesuit university that grants graduate and professional degrees. It is also larger than the endowments of Villanova and Marquette, both larger universities that also have Catholic affiliations.

**Curriculum**

Holy Cross does not pretend to be anything other than a traditional liberal arts college aside from offering majors in Accounting and Computer Science, as well as an Education minor for students who are interested in teaching in secondary schools.

According to *College Results Online*, more than half (56 percent) of Holy Cross students who earned degrees in 2013 majored in the social sciences; nearly a quarter majored in the Humanities while almost fifth majored in Computer Science, Math or a science.
Cross celebrates academic achievement through a four-day Academic Conference at the end of the Spring semester. While most liberal arts schools host similar events, they typically run for only one day.

According to the college’s Web site, common requirements include one course each in Arts, Literature, Studies in Religion, Philosophical Studies, Historical Studies, and Cross-Cultural Studies; and two courses each in Language Studies, Social Science, and Natural and Mathematical Sciences. No more than two courses from a single academic department may be counted toward fulfillment of the common requirements, except that students may take a third common requirement course in the same department where the Language Studies requirement is fulfilled. Calculus is considered the entry-level math at Holy Cross. Aside from Passport, a three-week college-level writing and math course that runs before the start of the Fall semester, there are no remedial courses at Holy Cross.

The college requires freshmen to take a year-long Montserrat Seminar. Named for the Spanish mountain climbed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, Montserrat seminars are grouped into six different thematic clusters (Contemporary Challenges, Core Human Questions, Divine, Global Society, Natural World, and Self). Cluster faculty organize co-curricular events that develop each cluster's annual theme and bring cluster students together to enhance their seminar experiences. Students in a particular cluster also live together in the same residence hall to facilitate the discussion of ideas in informal settings outside class and to cultivate meaningful relationships with peers. Essentially, these courses help to get students settled into Holy Cross as well as prepare them to take on a very demanding education. Unlike freshman seminars at many other schools, the Montserrat Seminar is more of a “big picture” course about an issue or problem—and it carries a workload similar to any other freshman course.

Holy Cross does not expect freshmen to commit to a major until the middle of the sophomore year, but they can declare after their first semester if faculty consider them to be ready. In fact, all of the students in each of the freshman classes that have entered since 2012 have been considered “undeclared.” The college selects 30 students for its Honors Program—but they are selected from the freshman class during the spring of the freshman year and begin Honors coursework as sophomores.

Each class also has a Class Dean from the faculty or the college administration who also serves as the parent’s liaison for the class. The Class Dean will send incoming freshmen a questionnaire to learn preferences for academics as well as housing. Seventy percent of the incoming class is accompanied to summer orientation by their parents. Maintaining the parent relationship is more important at Holy Cross than most other schools, especially if the parents are also alumni. Nearly half of the Holy Cross alumni
have made a contribution to their alma mater over the past two years, according to the data that the college submits to *U.S. News*.

While a high school academic record might be examined against an applicant’s intended major during the admissions process, Holy Cross is one school where it is best to be as strong as possible in every subject, even the subjects where a student would consider themselves to be weak. The college expects you to try all of them as you work towards a degree. In this respect Holy Cross is very much like the smaller Ivy League schools, Columbia and Dartmouth as well as more selective liberal arts college such as Bowdoin or Colby. It is not a place where a pure scientist will avoid the humanities; nor will a pure humanist avoid the natural or physical sciences.

You’re likely to see small classes most of the way through a Holy Cross education. Only 6 percent of all classes offered at Holy Cross in 2014-15 had 30 or more students, according to the college’s 2015-16 Common Data Set. Only 11 had more than 40 students; there were no large-lecture courses with 100 or more. The average class had 19 students; most were smaller.

Holy Cross students gave their faculty a rating of 3.77 (out of a possible 5) on RateMyProfessors.com. By comparison students at Patriot League rival Colgate (3.77) held their faculty in similar regard; those league rivals Bucknell (3.84) and Lafayette (3.82) regarded their teachers more highly. Students at Boston College (3.94) and Georgetown (3.81) did as well. So did students at Bates, Bowdoin, Colby and Wesleyan. However, those schools are also more selective than Holy Cross.

**Community**

The Holy Cross campus looks and feels expensive, befitting its stature as one of the oldest colleges in New England. The college has done an excellent job in maintaining its older buildings as well its modern student center and administrative offices. With over 90 percent of the student body living on campus, Holy Cross takes *community traditions*, social and religious, quite seriously, probably more than most other liberal arts colleges. This is a good school for students who want a rich campus life as well as the rigorous academics.

The campus is situated on a hilltop overlooking Worcester, giving it a suburban feel within a city location. There is a lot of road construction near the campus for city streets as well as access on to Interstate 235 that leads into Worcester. Unlike schools such as Colgate or Wesleyan, where you walk from campus into a downtown, you need to take a bus or have access to a car to travel within Worcester or to other places. Fortunately, the bus fare for college students is a low $1.50.
There have also been few reported incidents of crime on campus according to the college’s 2015 Clery Report. There was only one reported sexual offense on campus in the three years between 2012 and 2014 and few reported incidents of other crimes. The most reported crimes were alcohol-related disciplinary referrals; there was a high of 29 reported for 2014.

Holy Cross is one of the smallest private colleges in the U.S. to compete in NCAA Division I scholarship varsity sports. About a quarter of the student body competes in 27 varsity sports, including two that are non-scholarship, more than many larger schools. This past season the men’s basketball team earned the Patriot League’s automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament by winning the conference tournament, despite having a losing record during the regular season. Boston Celtics Hall of Famers Bob Cousy and Tom Heinsohn played for Holy Cross. They later won championship rings and coached in the NBA. Since joining the Patriot League in 1991, the Crusaders have won the league championship six times. They have made 13 appearances in the NCAA Tournament since 1947, winning the National Championship the first (and only) time that year. The women’s basketball team has won the conference title 11 times since 1991, most recently in 2007.

With more than 182,000 residents, Worcester, Massachusetts is the second-largest city in New England, after Boston, and is within 40 miles of that city. It's relatively easy to get into Boston by bus, train or car. Worcester is also home to 13 colleges as well as 38,000 college students; about the same number of undergraduates as Penn State or Michigan State have on campus, and has much of the amenities that you would find in or around State College or East Lansing. Worcester has its own civic center that will attract most entertainers and speakers who would appear in a college town.

However, unlike the college towns that host a flagship state university, college campuses in Worcester are not next to each other. But the city has received media accolades for being a great place for recent college graduates to live. Students who are interested in starting their own businesses—and many graduates remain in the area—might find Worcester to be a more attractive location for a start-up than Boston. Similar properties, such as factory spaces, are available at lower costs. Housing prices are much lower as well.

**Comforts**

Holy Cross is very residential. Just over 90 percent of the student body lives on campus; upper-class students must apply if they want to move off, aside from study abroad. Holy Cross keeps its housing open during the fall break, even when there are no classes scheduled. Each building has traditions that go back more than a decade. These include Chateau de Wheeler, a student-run show and Hansel Jam, a music festival, among other hall events. Each hall has its own custodians and housekeepers. Laundry is coin
operated though there is a Purple Bag pick up service for students who do not want to wash their clothes.

Holy Cross takes the freshman living experience quite seriously. The residence life office matches 80 percent of the freshmen to housing in traditional corridor-style halls. The freshmen halls: Hansel, Mullady and Wheeler are among the oldest on-campus although they have been well-maintained. These halls are co-ed by alternating floor.

Sophomores also reside in traditional corridor-style halls in double rooms. Juniors are offered suite-style housing; a small number of rooms will share a private bath. These rooms are slated to receive new furniture for the next academic year. However, more than a fifth of a junior class goes abroad during the fall or the spring. Only seniors may live in apartment-style housing.

Holy Cross requires all students living in residence halls to carry an unlimited meal plan, including access to Kimbell Dining Hall as well as dining dollars that can be spent in other locations on campus. Apartment residents also have the option of purchasing a small meal plan.

Housing in Worcester is quite inexpensive for any city, let alone one in New England. It is possible to find off-campus apartments that rent for less than the housing on campus. However, the campus is on a hilltop, not within an easy walk to the city. Living off campus would require a car, or a good knowledge of the local bus system for those willing to walk up the hill.

**Connections**

Among the more than 24,000 Holy Cross alumni registered on LinkedIn.com, approximately 7,600 live in and around the Boston area while 4,900 live in and around New York City. There are also more than 1,000 situated around Washington D.C. Nearly 1,900 work in Finance while more than 1,300 are entrepreneurs. The largest sector represented is Education with almost 2,200 alumni.

Holy Cross alumni are also very loyal. The college reported to U.S. News that nearly half of its alumni (49 percent), on average, made a contribution over the past two years. For comparison Holy Cross had a higher alumni giving rate than sports rivals Bucknell (30 percent), Colgate (40 percent) and Lafayette (33 percent). Notable alumni include U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas; James Burke, former CEO of Johnson and Johnson; trial attorney Edward Bennett Williams, who formerly owned the Baltimore Orioles and the Washington Redskins and political commentator and writer Chris Matthews, among many others.

Career services are excellent. Career development staff begin the relationship with parents before students, meeting with them during summer orientation. Career services
and academic advising come together early, including a Sophomore Career Advising program. Students who are undecided on a major are given the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, a professional assessment, to help them consider academic and career paths.

Being small, but well-endowed, Holy Cross has a fund to offer stipends to students who want to intern with non-profit organizations. There are also junior/senior credit-bearing internships that tie work on the job with a seminar class. Holy Cross is also unique in operating its very own junior/senior internship program in Washington D.C. which combines work with a seminar and a thesis. Over 100 students remain on campus at summer to conduct research with faculty. The college approaches student teaching differently for those interested in becoming secondary school teachers; students will work in field placements during the fall after their senior year, rather than their last semester on campus. Holy Cross is also a member of the Liberal Arts Career Network, a consortium of selective liberal arts schools that share a job and internship board.

The career development office received an excellent (88 percent) response to their survey of graduates in the Class of 2014. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of graduates had found employment within nine months after graduation. While the majority (59 percent) remained in New England, especially Boston), a quarter of those surveyed found full-time employment in and around New York City. This is interesting considering that the majority of the graduates did not originally come from New England states. Starting salaries reported ranged from $32,400 (Education) to $57,900 (Accounting).

Conclusions

If someone tells you that Holy Cross is one of the best liberal arts colleges in the United States, don’t argue. The college, like many similar schools, does an excellent job of retaining and graduating a freshman class as well as in preparing them for further education or the job market. Holy Cross has more resources than most similar schools of its size, especially in student success and career services. It will also do more than most to meet a family’s financial need. And, it is a great school for a smart athlete who wants to compete at the Division I level while still maintaining good academic standing.

Holy Cross is a great school for a student who received and succeeded in a rigorous high school academic program, including the most advanced courses that s/he could take in every college-prep subject. Those who truly struggled in one or two subject areas here, especially math or science, would have a rough ride, presuming that they can be admitted.

In addition, like other Jesuit schools, Holy Cross requires courses in theology and philosophy that go beyond general education requirements. While students are not
required to be Catholic to attend Holy Cross, or attend mandatory religious services of any faith, it helps to be interested in at least discussing a religious identity.

Given the schools that applicants consider most often, Holy Cross is not the place for students who are looking for Greek life or a pastoral campus setting. Worcester has its charms, as well as amenities, such as a civic center, that you will find in college towns that host a very large state university. However, it is difficult to call Worcester a college town; the campuses are not close together, nor do students at the colleges mingle very much.

Holy Cross is also more a “spirit and sports” school, than other liberal arts colleges, mainly because of its Patriot League affiliation and because so many of the students are also athletes. Athletes do not get a pass in the admissions process if their academics area weak—they have to take the same classes as everyone else—but athletic ability can enhance the chances for a student with a strong academic record within an applicant pool that has so many well-qualified candidates.

If you want a rigorous liberal arts education within a city setting, there are few choices among liberal arts colleges. Holy Cross is one of the best.

**Report Card: College of the Holy Cross**

- 4-Year/6-Year Graduation Rates: A
- Freshman Retention: A
- Costs: B+
- Curriculum: A
- Community: B+
- Comforts: A
- Connections: A