

BELMONT ABBEY COLLEGE

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In 1876 the Order of St. Benedict established a monastery and school in Belmont on land donated by missionary priest Father Jeremiah O’Connell. The school was renamed Belmont Abbey College in 1913. Early in the college’s history the monks next door ran a dairy farm, the proceeds of which helped fund the school. “For years, the endowment of the college was the monks,” Abbot Placid Solari, chancellor of the college, told the *Gaston Gazette* in 2002.

Today the Belmont Abbey monastic community continues to serve as the bulwark of the college. The Benedictines sponsor the school, serve on its board of trustees, and do much of the teaching. The mission of the Abbey is to educate “in the liberal arts tradition as guided by the Catholic intellectual heritage and inspired by the 1,500-year-old Benedictine monastic tradition. This heritage is sustained through fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church,” says the college catalog. In conformity with Pope John Paul II’s 1990 decree *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, President William Thierfelder has made a public profession of faith and taken an oath of fidelity to the church’s magisterium. Every professor of theology has a *mandatum* from the local bishop—official church recognition that they intend to teach in communion with the church. This obedience to a Vatican decree, flouted by most so-called Catholic colleges, sets Belmont Abbey College apart. So does the excellence and seriousness of its core curriculum. Rooted in philosophy, theology, and the classical liberal arts, it encourages the sort of academic well-roundedness that lies at the heart of every good liberal education.



Academic Life: The Rule of Benedict

The Abbey catalog states that, “the skills, knowledge, and values we seek to instill through the core [curriculum] are a tangible manifestation of the spirit of the Benedictine founders of the College, whose basilica, monastery, and original school buildings give architectural shape to their singleness of purpose.” The school’s core is designed to

familiarize students with the history, philosophy, and fundamental texts of Western civilization—all of which the Benedictine order helped save during the Dark Ages—as well as with the life and Rule of St. Benedict. Students must take nineteen core classes, or narrowly targeted electives, and fulfill several other requirements:

- “First-Year Symposium,” an “introduction to the values, traditions, and academic culture characteristic of a Catholic, Benedictine liberal arts education”;
- “Writing on Contemporary Issues” and “Argumentative Prose”;
- one course in mathematics;
- two courses in science;
- a two-semester sequence on Christian thought;
- “Logic”;
- an “Introduction to Philosophy” course (students choose either ancient and medieval philosophy or modern and contemporary);
- “Ethics”;
- a two-semester sequence on either world civilization or American history;
- “American Government” and another social science course;
- one class in English literature and a course in world or American literature;
- a fine arts course;
- a Global Perspectives requirement, which can be fulfilled by taking an intermediate-level modern language, completing one of several humanities core electives such as “World Literature,” “Introduction to Art in Western Civilization,” or “World Civilization,” or by significant academic experience abroad;
- a computer competency course, exam, or a “technology-intensive” course; and
- a Great Books capstone course, taught in small groups, which focuses on the history of ideas in Western culture with selected readings from ancient, medieval, and modern writers.

“To be liberally educated means not only recognizing the inherent value of these great texts, but also becoming aware of their place in the larger dialectical history. The best way to learn this history is to read and study some of the great books of the Western intellectual tradition. Education in this tradition is ultimately moral in that it examines various teachings regarding the purpose of human life,” asserts the college website. Can somebody say “Amen?”

Trendy classes do not get in the way of serious study at the Abbey. “Novelty is not big on this campus,” says a professor. “There are no feminist, ethnic, or gay and lesbian studies here.”

The honors program at the Abbey allows students to work with professors on independent-study projects and to engage in cultural activities outside the classroom. Honors students are also offered a set of more advanced courses, such as “World Civilization” and “American Polity,” which fulfill many of the core curriculum requirements. A student must maintain a minimum GPA of 3.0 in order to remain in the program.

Students highly recommend the teaching in the English department, where requirements for majors are solid, including: “Literature of the English Renaissance,” “Restoration and Eighteenth-Century British Literature,” “Shakespeare,” and “Literary Criticism.” The senior faculty members of the English department are known for their strong commitment to teaching.

Another department noted for its attention to teaching is biology, whose faculty “groom their students for medical school and follow their careers,” says one professor.

The philosophy department stresses breadth of knowledge and depth of analysis. Students study the systematic disciplines of logic, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. With few philosophy majors, advanced courses are taught on a cyclical basis—so you might have to wait a few semesters to fulfill a requirement or to take a desired elective. Theology majors supplement their theology courses with courses in philosophy. After becoming well-acquainted with the Catholic tradition of theological reflection, they write a senior thesis directed by one of the department faculty.

The history department requires students majoring in history to take two survey courses in world civilization and United States history. A comprehensive exam for history majors is taken upon completion of coursework.

The education department has suffered recently from a loss of faculty and is in the process of hiring a new department chair. While the language studies program is not large enough to offer majors, introductory and intermediate courses are taught in Spanish, French, Italian, and Latin. Serious modern-language students can avail themselves of the school’s study-abroad program. It offers language, business, history, and science programs in a number of locations, including Germany, India, Europe, Guatemala, and Peru. Students must first qualify academically (a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.5 is required) and have junior status before they can enroll in the program.

Noteworthy faculty members at the Abbey include Elizabeth Baker, Sheila Reilly, and Robert Tompkins in biology; Russell Fowler, Martin Harris, Michael Hood, and Mary Ellen Weir in English; Chris Kirchgessner, O.S.B., Jane Russell, O.S.F., and David Williams in theology; Stephen Brosnan in mathematics and physics; James Giermanski and David Neipert in international business; and Angela Blackwood and Lynne Shoaf in accounting.

First-Year Symposium instructors serve as primary academic advisors for students during their first year. Each student must choose a major field of study by the second

VITAL STATISTICS

Religious affiliation:
Roman Catholic
Total enrollment: **887**
Total undergraduates: **871**
SAT/ACT medians:
 SAT V: **500**, M: **500**;
 ACT: **19**
Applicants: **1,016**
Applicants accepted: **74%**
Accepted applicants who enrolled: **22%**
Tuition: **\$16,870**
Room and board: **\$8,588**
Freshman retention rate: **56%**
Graduation rate: **44%** (4 yrs.), **47%** (6 yrs.)
Courses with fewer than 20 students: **87%**
Student-faculty ratio: **14:1**
Courses taught by graduate students: **none**
Most popular majors:
business, education, biology
Students living on campus:
56%
Guaranteed housing for four years? yes
Students in fraternities: **20%**
sororities: **20%**

semester of the sophomore year. After a student declares an academic major, a professor from within the department that supports the major will become his advisor. Students must meet each semester with their advisors to discuss their choices of coursework for the next term. Students find the Academic Resource Center very useful. The center offers tutoring by faculty in core subjects such as math, biology, and English composition.

With a student-faculty ratio of 14 to 1 and an average class size of seventeen, student-faculty relationships are strong at the Abbey. A professor says that John Henry Newman's motto, "heart speaks to heart," could describe faculty-student relationships at the Abbey. "Most of the faculty agree that our students are best served by teachers who want to teach. Our loads are too heavy to engage in research," says the same professor. The faculty report that their level of collegiality is high, that their peers are "really competent and experienced," and that they "live and die by teaching."

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The Bradley Institute for the Study of Christian Culture supports the mission of the college by "fostering an understanding of the Catholic intellectual heritage and by advancing the truths of Christian thought and an appreciation of their unique impact upon the development of Western culture," says the institute's website. The institute's symposium topics range from business, legal, and medical ethics to history and philosophy. Recent titles included "The Role of Government in the Moral Development of Citizens," "Faith and Politics Today," and "The New Constitution of Iraq."

Students who receive financial assistance such as grants and scholarships (which includes some 90 percent of students), must attend five cultural events each

semester to fulfill a "cultural events requirement." In addition, they must complete ten hours of community service each semester. Attendance at a Bradley Institute lecture will fulfill one cultural requirement. Other events that fulfill this requirement include plays, poetry readings, and musical presentations. Students serve at homeless shelters, schools, domestic violence centers, animal shelters, crisis pregnancy programs, and other nonprofits to fulfill community service obligations. According to the school, the purpose of this requirement is to "encourage students to step beyond their own boundaries and step into the community"

The Charlotte Area Educational Consortium allows Abbey students to take classes at, and faculty to share library resources with, twenty colleges and universities in the greater Charlotte area.

Student Life: Gothic Revival

Charlotte, the largest city in the Carolinas, has become the melting pot of the South. Across the Catawba River, ten miles west of Charlotte, the town of Belmont offers a quaint setting in a small community of 15,000. The town's streets are lined with gracious mansions surrounded by lilac, magnolia, and dogwood trees. Stowe Park in the downtown area is the site of special events like concerts and movies. Belmont is located two hours from the Great Smokey Mountains and four hours from the North Carolina coast.

The Abbey's 650-acre wooded campus is home to the Belmont Abbey Monastery and the Abbey Basilica. Most of the Gothic Revival buildings were designed and built by the monks themselves in the nineteenth century. Priest-architect Michael McInerney, O.S.B., was the monastery's resident builder. Among his most notable contributions is St. Leo Hall, built in 1906. It provides the backdrop for visitors as they get their first glimpse of campus. Today the building houses faculty offices, the college's bookstores, career services, and Grace Auditorium. The college itself and Abbey Basilica are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The monks host thousands of visitors each year who come for tours and retreats.

For many of the students, the twenty or so monks on campus are confessors, counselors, mentors, and friends who make the college a "real home away from home," as a student reports. (This is fitting, since the family is the model of Benedictine life.) A senior wrote in the *Crusader* student newspaper, "I love the fact that we get to learn from, take classes with, go on retreats with, eat with, watch basketball games with, laugh at, get into snowball fights with, cheer for, and mourn the monks."

The school's plans for the future include several building projects, new majors and minors, sports teams, scholarships, and possibly a masters program, as well as increasing enrollment. While most people on campus applaud the initiatives, there are some who bemoan so many changes. One professor wrote in the *Crusader* that some people feel that "the speeding train is perhaps morphing into a 'product line' that isn't Abbey College at all."

Across the Catawba River from the school, the U.S. National Whitewater Center and Olympic training center is scheduled to open in the spring of 2006. This will be a public park offering the facilities and amenities of an outdoor recreational center with a custom-made whitewater river.

Almost 90 percent of freshmen—but less than half the upperclassmen—live on campus. Housing includes three residence halls and a four-building apartment complex where men and women live on separate floors. Overnight guests in student housing can only stay with students of the same sex. Some students choose to live in close proximity to other students in "households," faith-sharing groups in the residence halls

SUGGESTED CORE

Taking the college's honors program curriculum may cover the contents of courses 1, 2, 5, and 8. See also Theology 103/104: Introduction to Scripture, Old Testament / New Testament; Theology 101: Christian Thought I; English 410: Shakespeare; and History 309: U.S. History, 1492–1877.

or apartment buildings. Members of the four households—Faithful Daughter, Brothers in Christ—Sons of Mary, Our Lady of Good Counsel, and One Body in Christ—are committed to living their faith in their daily lives on campus. In addition to the households, 20 percent of students belong to one of the three sororities or three fraternities.

In keeping with the Abbey’s Catholic and Benedictine traditions, students are expected to follow school guidelines on conduct between men and women and to wear appropriate attire. “Sexual activity outside of marriage is contrary to the Law of God and the teachings of the Catholic Church, and therefore, not condoned by the College. Promiscuous behavior, depending on the facts and circumstances of each case, may result in disciplinary action including possible dismissal from the College,” says the student handbook. Neatness, cleanliness, and good taste are the guiding norms for dress on campus. “Attire that is disrespectful of the College’s mission and heritage is not permitted (for example, t-shirts with disrespectful slogans).”

At Belmont Abbey, alcohol is not permitted in public areas of residence halls; however, twenty-one-year-old students are free to imbibe in their rooms. Kegs, bars, drinking games, and punch containing alcohol are prohibited on campus. Events serving alcohol with more than fifteen guests require at least one officer, arranged through campus police, to be on-site and are limited to four hours in duration.

Students describe the student body at Belmont Abbey College as “friendly” and “like a big family.” Students know the names of the cafeteria staff, the janitors, and the postal clerk on campus. It is not the kind of place where students fall through the cracks. “The student body at the Abbey has been over the years mostly Protestant rather than Catholic. That is changing now as more Catholics move into this area, but I think that this history has affected the campus culture in a positive way, i.e., towards openness,” says a professor. Many Abbey students are originally from the Carolinas, New Jersey, Georgia, New York, or Florida. Home-educated students feel comfortable on campus. President Thierfelder and his wife are themselves parents of nine homeschooled children.

The College Union Board is a student group that sponsors social weekends, dances, comedians, musical performers, coffeehouse performances, lectures, and other special events. Additional groups include the Student Government Association, Senior Class Counsel, Peace and Justice Committee, International Club, the *Agora* (a literary magazine), chess club, Democratic and Republican clubs, BAC Dance Team, Abbey Cheerleaders, and the Commuter Council.

Established in 1883, the Abbey theater is one of the oldest continuously operating theaters in the Southeast. The Abbey Players and Belmont Community Theatre present six productions a year, including dramas, stylish comedies, major musicals, and a Shakespearean production. Recent productions have included the musical *Into the Woods*, the comedy *The Boys Next Door*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *Macbeth*. The Abbey Chorus, Belmont Abbey Quintet, and Carolina Pro Musica (an instrumental group that plays pre-1800 music on historic instruments) are also active on campus.

The monks gather in the Abbey Basilica to pray or celebrate Mass four times a day, and the Abbey community is welcome to join them for all of these services. The

students are under the spiritual care of the monks, one of whom serves as the chaplain for Campus Ministry. Campus Ministry offers an “Alternative Spring Break” program that allows students to travel to the Caribbean or Central America for charitable and pastoral work. Crusaders for Life is the college’s pro-life group. Each year a group of faculty, staff, monks, and students attend the March for Life in Washington. The Hintemeyer Program for Catholic Leadership provides full scholarships for freshman and transfer students who demonstrate active Catholic leadership.

The Belmont Abbey College Crusaders participate in athletics at the NCAA Division II level. Abbey Athletics has recently grown from twelve varsity teams to sixteen varsity and two junior varsity teams, and from 160 athletes to 260. This growth has made the college one of the top schools in the Carolina Virginia Athletic Conference. New teams include men’s and women’s lacrosse, women’s golf, men’s wrestling, JV baseball, and JV basketball. The other twelve sports offered are men’s and women’s soccer, basketball, cross-country, and tennis; men’s baseball and golf; and women’s volleyball and softball. Intramural sports programs at the school include “extreme dodge ball,” indoor volleyball, bowling leagues, flag football, aerobics classes, martial arts, softball, table tennis, ultimate frisbee, golf, chess, tennis, and a jogging club. The renovated Wheeler Athletic Center has a new fitness center, an athletic training facility, and auxiliary gyms.

Students can call Campus Police for escorts twenty-four hours a day year round. In 2004, the school reported six burglaries, one aggravated assault, and one sex offense.

Tuition at Belmont Abbey College in 2005–6 was \$16,870; room and board averaged \$8,588. Eighty percent of students at the college receive need-based financial aid. The average student loan debt of recent graduates is \$17,125.