



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 13, 2011

Saint Anselm College: “Classroom for America”

Well not exactly. The college does have a marketing department and does spend some money letting the world know about its highly respected academic standing and its well-rounded liberal arts curriculum. But ever since the college began hosting debates leading up to the quadrennial New Hampshire presidential primary elections, the school's notoriety and sheer visibility have been elevated by telecasts over CNN, Fox News, ABC, and other national and international cable and broadcast outlets.



"It gives us the opportunity to be the classroom for America," says Father Jonathan DeFelice, president of the college and a monk in the Order of Saint Benedict, which founded the college in 1889. Back then the common mode of transportation was horse and wagon, and the fastest form of communication was telegraph. Today, the parking lots on campus are filled with student and faculty cars, and a fleet of vehicles is at the service of the monastery as well. (Yes, monks are allowed to drive automobiles.) The 21st century campus is fully wired and connected to the world, with computers in every classroom and office and at every library desk. And cellphones are ever in the hands of students as they wend their way from classroom to library to coffee shop on the spacious and well-manicured grounds of the hilltop campus overlooking Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city. The debates, which might otherwise be considered intrusive, usually take place at a time when students are away on semester breaks or, as in tonight's event, when most students are gone for the summer.

The event helps the nation become informed about the candidates, says Father Jonathan, and gives the candidates an opportunity to air the issues. "We're very happy to be part of the process," he says. And it has had an impact on the recruiting of students.



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"We have had students come here who first heard of us during one of these debates," he notes. But what do they learn about the college other than that it provides a nice backdrop for the political campaigns. "They're directed to our website," the president notes, pointing out another advantage today's college has over the education carried out in days when the only webs were cobwebs or spider's creations.

The computer-savvy students also know that the views expressed by the candidates are not necessarily those favored by the college. As luck would have it, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani four years ago was nearly struck by lightning while he was explaining his "pro-choice" position on abortion, which is decidedly at odds with the teaching of the Catholic Church. The thunderstorm that evening provided the backdrop for the flash of light that came perilously close to Giuliani's microphone, causing the former mayor and federal prosecutor to jump back and the other candidates to move quickly away from him on the platform. A few years earlier, General Wesley Clark, then vying for the Democratic nomination, said he knew what "the party line" is with the Catholic Church on abortion, but "I have freedom of conscience." No one pointed out the duty that each person has to conform his or her conscience to the moral law and the word of God. But Father Jonathan says he is not worried that people will be confused about the mission and message of Saint Anselm College when statements like that go out to the world from the college's campus.

"I think people know what debate is," he says. At other times, statements by political figures visiting the college are subject to questions and counterpoints from the audience of faculty, students, and members of the general public. The college has become increasingly involved in the political life of the state and nation since the creation on campus of the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College, housed in a former Army Reserve headquarters that was renovated with the help of a federal grant.

The college continues to put emphasis on the humanities, with course requirements in theology and philosophy as well as literature, fine arts, and the physical and social sciences. Though no political party is "home" to the college, a Catholic politics requires a respect for human life at all stages, an active concern for and assistance to the disadvantaged, and religious freedom, the college president says. Naturally, jobs are an issue for Catholics as well as people of other faiths, but there is no consensus on a Catholic, Protestant or Jewish plan for full employment. If all goes well tonight and in the days ahead, Saint Anselm College will keep some of its staff employed in the task of answering queries from the press and public about the college and the quality of education at an idyllic setting midway between the Boston Common and New Hampshire's White Mountains, and 45 minutes from the Atlantic Ocean. As "Shoeless" Joe Jackson said in *Field of Dreams*, "Is this Heaven?" To which Father Jonathan might cheerfully reply, "No, Goffstown."

Photo: St. Saint Anselm College in Goffstown, N.H.



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