

Marian one of top 50 Catholic schools for second year

Susan W. Murray

For the second straight year, Woodstock's Marian Central Catholic High School has been ranked as one of the top 50 Catholic high schools in the nation on the Catholic High School Honor Roll. The list is compiled by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, a nonprofit Christian educational organization based in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Two other high schools from the Rockford Diocese, Aurora Central Catholic and Boylan Central Catholic in Rockford, join Marian in the top 50. Of the nation's 1,200 Catholic high schools, about 250 entered for inclusion in this year's list. The selection committee evaluates the schools in three areas: academics, Catholic identity and civic education.

Academics

Selection is based on a school's academic offerings, student performance on advanced placement tests, standardized test scores and the total number of honors classes offered.

Marian currently offers honors courses in English, social studies, math, science, music, foreign language and an intensive fourth-year religion course. Students may also take advanced placement courses in physics, calculus, American history and fourth-year English. Of the 117 students who took AP tests this year, 82 scored well enough to earn college credit.

Marian students consistently excel on standardized tests. Juniors take the ACT test in April. In 2004, the mean score for Marian students was 23.3, compared to the state average of 20.9. This year's senior class boasts one National Merit Semifinalist and eight Commended Students based on results of the PSAT test. While scholarship awards to seniors are not part of the

selection criteria, Marian has an impressive track record of helping its seniors find scholarship money for college. In the 2005 graduating class, 107 of 180 students received scholarships which totaled \$5,832,000.

Catholic identity

Marian prides itself on its strong Catholic identity. A total of 83 percent of the students are Catholic, and 82 percent of the faculty is Catholic. All students take four years of religion classes, and one of the priests on Marian's faculty offers Mass every day in the chapel at 7:30 a.m. Once a month, the entire student body gathers in the gym for an all-school Mass. In addition, students go on retreat once a year with their classmates.

Civic education

In the area of civic education, the Catholic High School Honor Roll evaluated schools not only on the history, government, geography and economics courses offered by the social studies department but also on the extracurricular activities that promote involvement within the community. Marian students can participate in Junior Statesmen of America, a political debate organization, or apply to be a member of a delegation for the Model United Nations held in Chicago each February. Students can also be members of the Project Hope club or the Key Club, a Kiwanis extension organization. Both organizations are dedicated to service. The Key Club also promotes leadership within the school and local community. Each November, the school inducts new junior and senior members into the National Honor Society, recognizing them for scholarship, leadership, character and service.

Marian Principal Chuck Rakers identified five aspects of Marian that he believes make the school a special place. He described the first as commitment of the school's families to Catholic education and to their children's future education.

The second reason was that, as a group, the student body is serious and focused on education. A third reason, said Rakers, is that the school offers 18 varsity sports, nine each for boys and girls, and 30 extracurricular activities other than athletics. Rakers believes that the size of the school itself is the fourth plus, for, when students come to know one another, a feeling of family exists. Finally, Rakers pointed out what he described as the most important emphasis at Marian: its spiritual identity and focus on faith, values and morals.

Always room for improvement

Even a school in the top 50 cannot rest on its laurels, however. Marian recently completed a self-study that was instrumental in formulating a strategic plan for the school through 2010. The school is considering a capital campaign to fund construction of a science wing and other technological improvements to the school. Rakers would also like to see the guidance department move into larger quarters. Because Marian draws students from 37 different grade and middle schools, the students exhibit a wide disparity in math and study skills. The math department will be looking at ways to most effectively teach students who come from different backgrounds with varying abilities.

The school is also considering hiring a special education teacher to help support any students with special needs.

When announcing the top 50 Catholic high schools, the honor roll committee identified what all of the schools had in common: "a commitment to excellence." That's not only good news for Marian students and their families, but for Woodstock, McHenry County and the larger world which these students will eventually impact.

Susan W. Murray can be reached at (815) 338-8040.