

## **Ambassador Day 2024**

### **“State of the University Address”**

#### **Opening**

Good morning. My name is Arvid Johnson, and it is my privilege to serve as the 9<sup>th</sup> president of the University of St. Francis in Joliet. We are a dynamic, Catholic, Franciscan university that is proud to serve the Will County Region and beyond.

I would like to begin by thanking you for joining us for our 11th Ambassador Day, which is designed to educate our friends and community partners about the University and, in return, to offer our expertise and resources to you and your organizations.

Before we get started, I’d like to acknowledge the presence of the many elected leaders – at all levels of government – who are in attendance with us this morning.

In addition to these leaders, I also am pleased to welcome some of my 25 or so bosses – namely, the members of our USF Board of Trustees – who are here...As well as members of our founding and sponsoring congregation: the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate.

I would also like to acknowledge and recognize the members of my Cabinet and the many other USF employees who are with us today. It is through them and their hard work that our mission is made real each and every day.

My intent with this morning’s State of the University Address is two-fold. First, I hope to demonstrate how USF continues to live its mission of preparing students to contribute to the world through service and leadership.

Second, I hope to use these points to stress how partnerships with you and so many other organizations and businesses allow us to work together to realize our vision of “A Shared Tomorrow” for our students and the communities each of us serve.

With that, I would like to begin my 11<sup>th</sup> – and final – “State of the University” Address.

#### **General Updates for Fall 2024**

I am pleased to report that the University of St. Francis is solidly positioned and moving forward.

##### *Start of the Fall 2024 Semester*

This fall, we once again welcomed students back to our campuses with the vast majority of our undergraduate courses scheduled to take place in-person and on-campus. Fall semester classes commenced on August 19<sup>th</sup>, and the semester has proceeded with a high level of energy and enthusiasm.

We also continue to share and spread the word about the high-quality education that USF offers to our students. Our admissions team works diligently to reach prospective students in a variety of ways with

the message that they will receive a high-quality education when they enroll at USF and that our value proposition remains among the highest in terms of “return on investment” across all colleges in the United States. Even at a time when the value of a college degree has been increasingly scrutinized, earning a degree from USF is a proven investment in the future that will yield a high return on investment.

### *Campus Safety*

Campus safety - at all levels of education - continues to draw national attention and is of utmost priority at USF.

This attention to detail does not go unrecognized. Last fall, the personal finance website WalletHub, released its 2023 College and University Rankings, which compared more than 900 higher-education institutions across 30 different measures. In the “Campus Safety” category, WalletHub ranked USF #1 in Illinois amongst all colleges and universities included in the report...for the third year in a row. We appreciate not only our valued partnerships with the Joliet Police and Fire Departments that make this possible but also what this says about the incredible students that we are blessed to serve! We also look forward to WalletHub’s releasing its 2024 College and University rankings later this fall and are hopeful to continue as the top-ranked Illinois school in the “Campus Safety” category.

### *Financial Update*

From a financial perspective, the University’s financial outlook continues to be strong, even as the challenges faced by institutions of higher education become more and more real. We remain in a solid financial position after the close of the 2024 fiscal year last May, and I am happy to report that USF’s operations have resulted in operational surpluses in 9 out of the past 11 years! I credit the University’s leadership team and Board of Trustees for making such an impressive feat possible.

Indeed, as a result of those surpluses, our financial capacity continues to expand, as well, with our net assets increasing by over \$30 million in the past 11 years, and now totaling close to \$60 million.

### *Nationally-Ranked*

Our programs (and the University as a whole) continue to earn recognition by national ranking organizations. So far this year, USF has been named to *U.S. News & World Report’s* “2025 Best National University” rankings, *The Princeton Review’s* “Best Colleges – 2025 Edition” rankings and *the Wall Street Journal’s* “America’s Best Colleges 2025” rankings. Additional rankings for this year will be released in the coming months, and we are confident that USF will continue to be recognized for its high-quality programs.

These rankings are more important now than ever before as high school students critically weigh their post-graduation options. Visit [stfrancis.edu](http://stfrancis.edu) for the latest news on how your University continues to stand out amongst its peers locally, regionally and nationally.

### *Keeping College Affordable*

It is important to note that high quality does not need to be accompanied by high price. We recognize that college affordability remains a concern of many families. To help ease this burden, the University of St. Francis provides virtually all of its students with some level of financial assistance and support –

whether academic or athletic scholarships or other, need-based funding. Last year, over \$22 million in institutional aid and scholarships were provided to our students. As a result, USF students annually maintain a loan default rate that is lower than the average of our peers – which include Lewis University, Benedictine University, St. Xavier University, and Dominican University – and less than half that of the state and national averages.

### *A Diverse Campus*

As a welcoming community of learners, we are proud that we continue to serve a diverse population of students. Approximately 47% of this year's first-year class is comprised of first-generation college students – that is, they are the first in their family to attend college. In fact, over the course of the past decade, an average of over 50% of our incoming first-year classes were first-generation college students. This is another indicator that we continue to support our mission and that we are successfully communicating the value of a college education to students with little previous exposure to higher education... all while impacting future generations through their value-added experiences at USF.

Additionally, and as importantly, over 56% of our first-year class identifies as minority.

### **Looking Back...Points of Pride**

Last spring, I announced that I will be retiring in May 2025, at the conclusion of my twelfth year of service to USF. While there is still much work to be done as I near my retirement, I would like to use some time today to take a look back at some of the wonderful milestones and achievements that our University has achieved since 2013.

Let me begin by saying “thank you” for the privilege that it has been to serve as the president of the University of St. Francis. Since I arrived at USF in 2013, I have been incredibly proud of the countless accomplishments that our university – that is, our students, employees, alumni, and Board of Trustees – has achieved. Although I could speak for hours on each of these accomplishments, I would like to focus on a few, select points of pride that have helped to lay a foundation for our vision of “A Shared Tomorrow”.

In 2013, USF began establishing a series of international partnerships with leading universities in countries across the globe, including the Czech Republic (2013), China (2019), and Vietnam (2021). This has allowed for hundreds of additional students to participate each year in USF undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Indeed, currently, over 800 students are studying in USF degree programs in the Czech Republic and Vietnam – and another 400 are studying in first-of-their-kind programs in China being offered by USF's partner university with the support of our faculty.

### *Campus Improvements*

USF has, also, invested in several campus improvements that have enhanced the learning environment in which we work to achieve our mission. These improvements include:

- The Plaster Center (2014) at our St. Bonaventure Campus. This facility (formerly, the Mode Theater) in downtown Joliet includes classrooms, a courtroom for mock trial activities, student study and leisure space, and computer labs. The facility houses the Recreation and Sport

Management and History, Political Science and Criminal & Social Justice degree programs. It is also home to the USF Business Incubator and the new USF Small Business Accelerator.

- Guardian Angel Hall (2016) at our St. Clare Campus. This facility (former Guardian Angel Home built in 1925 by USF's Sister Sponsors, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate) was renovated and re-opened in 2016. It currently serves students in the Leach College of Nursing and also houses the USF Human Resources Department, Business Office and Call Center.
- LaVerne and Dorothy Brown Science Hall (2018) – The 35,000-sq. ft. facility hosts USF students in over 40 different courses each week. The facility was built as a state-of-the-art replacement for the previous on-campus science facility, St. Albert Hall.

These additions collectively resulted in our operating three, dynamic, Joliet campuses (including the USF Art Gallery in downtown Joliet). And, before I leave this spring, USF plans to break ground on a new student success center on our Main Campus, so please keep an eye open for news on this exciting development.

#### *Focus on Federal Grants*

We are proud of the work that our University has done in partnership with McAllister & Quinn to secure federal grant funding that supports our students in a variety of ways. In the past few years, these efforts have resulted in over \$10 million in federal grants, including awards from:

- Advanced Nursing Education Workforce (ANEW) – This award helps to increase access to quality health and behavioral health care for underserved and rural areas in Illinois—especially in Will, Grundy and Cook counties.
- Department of Health and Human Services –Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – This award provides funding that created additional mental health resources and support for students following the challenges that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students
- U.S. Small Business Administration FY23 Congressional Community Project Grant (Small Business Accelerator) – This award resulted in the new USF Small Business Accelerator that operates in the Plaster Center alongside the USF Business Incubator.

#### *Proud to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution*

One additional grant I would like to mention is the Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions funding that we were awarded following our designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution in 2023 – indeed Will County's first (and only) Hispanic Serving Institution. This grant, worth close to \$3 million over five years, is funding a project entitled "Going from 'Si se Puede' to 'Si se Pudo,'" (translated to English as "Going from 'We Can Do It' to 'We Did It' ") designed to support capacity enhancements and innovative strategies to significantly increase retention and graduation rates for all students, and especially those who are Hispanic, from low-income households, or otherwise under-served.

#### *Fundraising Successes*

While grants play an important role in our university's fundraising efforts, they are only one part of our fundraising success. Led by our University Advancement team, USF's fundraising efforts have seen two of its most successful years in FY23 and FY24, in which over \$6 million was raised in each respective year. These totals bested the university's previous most successful year of fundraising – in fiscal 2015 – in which \$4.2 million was raised.

### *Caritas Scholarship Celebration*

Staying with the theme of fundraising, the annual Caritas Scholarship Celebration – an event that many of you have supported in the past, which raises funds for student scholarships – continues to be a great success. In fact, in the past ten years, over \$3 million has been raised for student scholarships, which is almost half the total of the funds raised in all 67 years of this annual event.

On a side note, I invite you to join my wife, Anne, and me and to save the date for our final Caritas – the 68th Annual Caritas Scholarship Celebration, which will take place on Saturday, April 12, 2025. It's sure to be yet another wonderful event in support of our students!

### *Centennial Celebration*

Looking back, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to recognize the centennial celebrations and campus improvements in 2020 that marked 100 years of Catholic, Franciscan education – including our Centennial Gateway (with its statue of St. Francis and a St. Bernard) and Centennial/Benoit Commons on the Quad. While our celebrations were greatly hampered by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued to recognize our past and commit to building a Franciscan future...together, in our second century.

Indeed, founded by the Sisters of Saint Francis of Mary Immaculate, our university has a rich history. Over the years, the institution transitioned from exclusively preparing the Sisters to teach, to becoming an all-women's college, to becoming coeducational in 1971, to affiliating with the Saint Joseph College of Nursing in 1997. Throughout the years, it has maintained its focus on offering a Catholic, comprehensive educational experience, focused on Franciscan values and rooted in the liberal arts, to each and every student.

### *Creating "A Shared Tomorrow" Together*

This morning has maintained a focus on sharing the story and successes of USF through an internal lens. Through a variety of channels, including general outreach, marketing and media work, service, and more, it is my hope that the information shared with you this morning not only comes as no surprise, but also that you have personally witnessed the positive impact that USF creates on a daily basis in Joliet, in Will County,... and beyond.

However, the stories of true impact are best told by those on the other side of that lens – the communities we serve and the partners with whom we serve alongside. This morning, we have invited two community leaders who know USF well and can speak – in their own words – to the wide-reaching impact of our university as we work together to create "A Shared Tomorrow."

First, I would like to invite Will County Executive Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant to the podium to share some comments.

[comments offered by County Executive Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant]

Thank you, Jennifer, for your comments and, more importantly, for your continued partnership. Next, I would like to invite Joliet City Council member and Caritas Committee member Cesar Cardenas to the podium to share some comments.

[comments offered by Joliet City Councilperson Cesar Cardenas]

Thank you, Cesar, for your comments and, more importantly, for your continued partnership, as well.

There are, certainly, countless other examples that could be shared by so many of you in attendance this morning. Thus, my request of you is that you share your USF stories with others in the community as a way to reinforce the possibilities that come about through a commitment to service and to partnerships. It is through these that we can create “A Shared Tomorrow” led by USF graduates who continue to live our Franciscan values and our university’s mission as they contribute to the world through service and leadership.

### **Closing**

As I close my presentation, I wish to do so by, once again, thanking you. I thank you for your invitation today to provide you with an update on Joliet’s only four-year university. More importantly, I thank for your support of me, of the University, and of our students over my over 11 years of service.

In our Franciscan tradition, and for the last time at this event as the President of the University of St. Francis, please know that I wish you “Pace e Bene”...or “peace and all good things” ... THANK YOU!