

# NOTES FROM The President's Desk

SEPTEMBER 2019

## Convocation Address delivered on September 23, 2019



Dear Assumption Community:

As we gather this afternoon, we do so amidst a period of change – a time of transition to something greater.

- ❖ The institution has reorganized into separate schools led by deans.
- ❖ New academic programs and extra-curricular activities have been introduced.

❖ A new health sciences building is under construction.

❖ The application before the state to attain university status continues to advance.

This period of change for the institution occurs as the number of high school graduates – particularly in New England – is declining. As you heard in our campus-wide workshop last week, many questions cloud the future of institutions like ours. Will we remain the same size? If not, how will we adapt? Through the transition to the new school structure and possibly becoming a university, how can Assumption become a more selective institution?

These are just some of the questions that must be addressed as we continue to navigate this period of challenge for higher education and as we finalize the next Strategic Plan. However, I am confident that we can confront the challenges and address these and many other questions, because we do so with years of preparation behind us and our belief in the value of the education we provide that has attracted students for many generations.

While much has changed, both physically and structurally, much has remained the same. We are still an institution guided by a mission that strives to form graduates known for critical intelligence, thoughtful citizenship and compassionate service. That mission will only strengthen as we proceed through this period of transition, one that instills a sense of promise and hope for our students, alumni, faculty and staff.

It is worth repeating what I said at last week's workshop. As we plan for the future of Assumption, it is crucial that the

emerging Assumption is in continuity with its past and its rich heritage. When re-founding is not in continuity with the past, an institution no longer knows itself and therefore loses its essence, loses its soul, indeed loses its direction. When that happens, our distinctiveness is lost and we are swallowed up into a sea of homogeneity that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to stand apart from other institutions. During this period of transition, let us not forget that our education has as its purpose forming students into a better version of themselves, or as St. Augustine said, "To become what we are not yet."

Our educational mission is about becoming, about shaping the soul, of striving to attain the fullness of one's potential, one's inherent greatness. This is a life-long journey, which is aptly captured in the motto of the College, "...until Christ be formed in you," which will come to its final attainment when we come to the end of this journey of life.

To prepare students to embark on this life-long journey we need them to encounter the great questions confronted by humanity in every generation and across the traditional liberal arts and sciences – philosophy, literature, art, science, theology, politics.

At the center of our educational mission is the most fundamental question we need our students to ask – what is the meaning of life. And in discerning the answer to this question, our goal needs to be, as Fr. D'Alzon made so clear, forming young people of character.

In the midst of all of the changes underway, the enduring nature of our educational mission as I have just described must be our guiding force. If it is, our students will be fundamentally changed, allowing them to live out their vocations in such a way as they will make the world a better place. This will not happen because of the skills they acquire while they are here, but rather because of who they have become first and foremost. Anything else they may do professionally or personally will flow from that inner transformation, or put another way, the formation they received that will allow them to live a fulfilling and honorable life. Isn't that, in the end, the purpose of a Catholic, liberal arts education?

I recently read an article in *The Catholic Thing* on John Henry Newman, who will be canonized next month, and his understanding of education. The author points out that Newman's devotion to education rested "on both the moral imperative of forming every person individually according to God's plan and the educational objective of cultivating the intellect, so that [one] can recognize, share, and defend truth.... Newman looked to faithful Catholic education for the repair of the human person." For Newman, education's goal is to effect the "integral formation of the human person." This is what guides the education we offer at Assumption.

As we look to the future guided by these principles and prepare for emerging challenges, we also take a few moments this afternoon to reflect upon our accomplishments of the past year.

#### *FINANCES*

Despite the challenges facing higher education, our financial position remains strong:

- ❖ An operating surplus for the 43rd consecutive year
- ❖ The endowment again exceeds \$100 million
- ❖ An "A-" rating from Standard and Poor's was reconfirmed a few weeks ago

#### *ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT*

The stable finances were bolstered by campus-wide efforts to recruit the incoming class.

I am pleased to report a nearly 7 percent increase in applications to Assumption for the Class of 2023; a total of 4,464 individuals applied to the institution.

In late August, we welcomed 570 first-year students to Assumption, an increase of nearly 4 percent over the previous year. There is no doubt that our new, modern, and fully responsive website – a collaborative effort from individuals in Information Technology, Enrollment Management and Communications - influenced many of those who not only chose, but entrusted Assumption to provide an education that prepares individuals to willingly use their gifts and talents to better the world.

Of those 570 new students, many who would not have normally considered Assumption, were attracted to our new programs: Cybersecurity, Data Analytics, Neuroscience, and Nursing. Others took interest in the new Blue & White Club Sports: Women's Ice Hockey, Men's Swimming, and E-sports.

Once students have chosen Assumption, in the classroom and on the field, they excel.

The institution received the President's Award for Academic Excellence from the NCAA. Assumption is ranked 21st in the nation.

The Greyhounds also finished 3rd in the NE10 President's Cup, the highest point tally in program history.

#### *ACADEMIC AFFAIRS*

In the classroom, our faculty continue to inspire and form the next generation of leaders.

While Assumption is not a Research I institution, research is an important aspect of our academic environment. The federal government has recognized the important research conducted here.

- ❖ Professor Michele Lemons secured a National Science Foundation grant for neurodevelopment research.
- ❖ Professors Joe Alfano and Jessica De la Cruz also secured a National Science Foundation grant to train mathematics teachers.

Following a lengthy process, the School of Nursing received pre-requisite and initial approval from the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing. The new nursing program welcomed its first cohort of 24 men and women in August.

While I could speak at length of the many accomplishments of each department and school, I would like to take a moment to share some impressive news from Human Services and Rehabilitation Studies, in particular the Communications Science and Disorders concentration.

100 percent – each student from this concentration that applied to a graduate studies program - was accepted to programs at a number of prestigious colleges and universities.

Congratulations not only to our graduates, but also to the faculty who work tirelessly with our students to ensure their success.

I am also proud that Assumption, thanks to a collaborative effort of many departments, received, for the first time, the Military Friendly School designation. New Veterans programs, a Veterans Lounge, and an annual event recognizing those who served our nation all contributed to this designation.

#### *STUDENT AFFAIRS*

Today's college student expects more than exemplary academics. They are seeking a vibrant and diverse campus.

As the student body changes and the College welcomes more ALANA students, we have witnessed an increase in the number of engaging events sponsored by the Cross-Cultural Center and ALANA such as celebrations to recognize: Latino Heritage Month; Native American History Month; Multicultural Day; Chinese New Year; Black History Month; and Women's History Month.

Through collaboration with administrators and students, we continue to introduce innovative programs, such as those sponsored by the Cross-Cultural Center.

That innovative spirit was recently recognized by the Association of Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities when they awarded the Office of Residential Life with a Mission Integration Award for the Foundations Friday program that incorporates our Catholic identity into student affairs programming.

#### *INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT*

Campus enhancements and the construction of the new Health Sciences Building are funded, in part, by the generosity of our alumni and friends of Assumption:

- ❖ Over \$3.3 million in cash and pledges was raised during the last fiscal year in support of the Light the Way Capital Campaign.
  - The total raised thus far is \$33.6 million – 95 percent of the \$35 million campaign goal
- ❖ On October 18, the campus community will gather to celebrate the formal unveiling of the Grenon School of Business, named for Assumption Prep alumnus David Grenon to celebrate his generous gift to the Capital Campaign and investment in the future of the business studies program at Assumption.
- ❖ And while the institution raised funds for the Capital Campaign, the Assumption Fund raised over \$1 million.

#### *MISSION*

As we transition to the new school structure and anticipate a transition to university status, individuals from Enrollment Management, Student Affairs, Office of Mission, and Communications have begun a collaboration to articulate our visual identity as a university, should the application be approved. This endeavor will respect the history of the institution.

Important to our story as an institution is reflecting upon the College's founding and the teachings of the Venerable Father Emmanuel d'Alzon.

Professor Christian Goebel, who was named the d'Alzon Chair, will assist the community in our continued understanding of the ongoing thinking about the College's mission and the Assumptionist education we provide.

Embedded in our mission is our Assumptionist and Catholic identity. As a Catholic institution of higher learning, it is incumbent upon us to provide students with opportunities to discover, learn about, or grow in their faith. Through a number of retreat, service and other programs, Campus Ministry provided more than 50 different programs to guide students on their faith journeys. The College was pleased to enhance that guidance this year with the arrival of Fellowship

of Catholic University Students, FOCUS, to support the work of Campus Ministry.

#### *STUDENT SUCCESS*

Our last two Strategic Plans were defined by themes that sought to strengthen the institution. With a renewed and more purposeful focus on student success, the transition to the new school structure, and anticipated change to university status, we, as an institution, (be it faculty, staff or administrators), must begin to think differently.

Regardless of our position, each of us is here for a single purpose: to educate and ensure the success of Assumption students. Not only does this vision help encourage the arrival of new students, but compels our existing students to remain at Assumption until graduation.

The newly formed Division for Student Success is already impacting the campus community in the area of retention.

With new space on the third floor of the d'Alzon Library, the Division has evolved into a collaborative hub that includes the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence and the Center for Purpose and Vocation. The new division also includes the Career Development and Internship Center.

The former Deans' Council was renamed the Community Assessment Response Evaluation or CARE Team. This team, which has been in place for almost 40 years, was renamed to better reflect its purpose. It is comprised of administrators from multiple divisions who proactively identify students in need of additional support or who may be in crisis. Just as each student is different, crisis situations come in many forms -- they may be personal, physical, emotional, psychological, inter-personal, academic, or spiritual in nature.

To conclude, during times of transition, there is a natural tendency to be uneasy about the future, notably during this challenging time for higher education. I encourage all of us to channel that uneasiness into excitement. Let us look into the future of the institution with hope; preparing our students as we have done for 115 years to make meaningful contributions to the world with their Assumptionist and Catholic education.

Let us cultivate a new way of thinking within ourselves and across the institution that will help Assumption and our students to adapt. To Endure. And to Thrive.

This is a time of great change for Assumption; for our students, and for all of us. A time of exciting change. A time of promise. We are all part of the ever-changing story of Assumption as we embark on a new chapter in our history, firmly rooted in a rich past and in our mission.

Thank you for your tireless work and unbounding enthusiasm in support of our students as we begin a new phase in the history of Assumption.

May God bless you and Assumption.

Thank you.

*Francesco C. Cesareo*

Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D.

President

