

Convocation 2017

President Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D.

A need for new academic spaces and the construction of a “classroom-office complex”. Reorganizations, fluctuations in enrollment, fewer students from which to recruit, stressed budgets and staff reductions.

What I just described sounds similar to the situation facing Assumption today. However, this was also the case for the College in almost every period of its history. The current state of the College is nothing new to Assumption, nor is it unique to other colleges of similar size and even those larger than Assumption who are experiencing the same realities. By looking back on the past history of the institution, we see time and again that the College is a resilient institution strong enough to adapt to emerging realities and the changing external environment.

As I mentioned in our community meeting, the higher education landscape is drastically different than it was five years ago; it is increasingly competitive and there are fewer students available to pursue a college degree, especially in New England and particularly in Massachusetts, a trend that will continue in the coming years. Throughout its history, the College routinely faced enrollment pressures when fewer students attending Assumption led to staff reductions and financial challenges. Yet, empowered by a passion for this institution and its mission, people of good will—staff and faculty such as yourselves-- came together and Assumption adapted, endured, then once again began to thrive.

We, too, will continue to endure and thrive as we reimagine the College in the new context in which higher education operates. The Strategic Plan - one that was inclusively developed with contributions from all areas of the College community – is responding to the current situation. This plan inspires us to reimagine how we approach the delivery of higher education in the current marketplace. It asks us to rethink what we do, how we do what we do, and ways in which we can move away from “business as usual” in all facets of the College, so that we remain a nimble and flexible institution, marked by creativity and innovation but always remaining firmly grounded in our mission.

We must continue our process of innovation; of adaptation. The current model is no longer effective in this environment. As one writer for *Change Magazine* aptly wrote, “The high tuition /high financial aid model of funding private colleges and universities is generating less tuition

revenue, while discount rates continue to climb...For many, challenges to the current business model mean that transformation is imperative.”

This imagination could result in changes to the structure of the institution and the exploration of new modes of learning, specifically in the area of adult online learning. Regardless of structural changes, the College will preserve its strength of providing a strong liberal arts education.

As it did so many times in the past, the College starts this academic year amongst challenges. It is important to note that we are not alone. Many colleges across the country are facing similar challenges and some find themselves in desperate situations resulting in closures and mergers. However, at Assumption, there is much to celebrate, as both the academic and physical landscape of the College has been transformed. From a wooded area between Fuller and Hagan has risen the magnificent Tsotsis Family Academic Center, a facility that serves as a beacon of hope and the future of this institution.

Since students returned to campus, many have marveled at this new facility and how it has already begun to change the way they are learning at Assumption. I have heard from both faculty and students that when they go to their new offices or teach in the classrooms, they can't believe they are still at Assumption. I hope you will join me for the official ribbon-cutting and Open House on October 20 at 4 p.m.

Complementing this new edifice are new academic programs available to our students who have chosen Assumption to guide them on a four-year journey of academic and personal discovery and growth.

Not only have students recognized the value of an Assumption education, but also external ranking organizations.

- This week, the College was ranked in the top 30 of regional colleges and universities and top 20 for value by U.S. News & World Report
- The Princeton Review ranked Assumption one of the “Best 382 Colleges” in the nation.

In an effort to respond to marketplace needs and attract new students to the College, a number of new academic programs were introduced or enhanced:

- A new health sciences major was developed in collaboration with the departments of Natural Sciences and Human Services and Rehabilitation Studies, which includes concentrations in five different areas: Pre-Clinical Health Professions, Pre-Physical Therapy, Pre-Occupational Therapy, Communication Sciences and Disorders and Patient Advocacy.
- The College introduced an Applied Behavior Analysis minor and recently received verification from the Behavioral Analyst Certification Board that the curriculum satisfies coursework requirements for taking the Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst

exam. These efforts complement the new graduate program which has already witnessed significant growth.

- A new engineering sciences minor provides students an option to explore this in-demand field.
- The Core Texts and Enduring Questions minor, and STEM concentration now available to elementary education majors will certainly enhance our liberal arts education.
- The psychology major and minor were significantly enhanced in response to Program Review.
- And finally, the College recently entered into an articulation agreement with the University of St. Thomas School of Law. Like our already existing articulation agreements with other law schools, Assumption students can earn an undergraduate and law degree in only six years. However, with this new agreement, students are guaranteed partial or full scholarships from St. Thomas.

This September also marks the beginning of the second year of the new Core Curriculum. To ensure that the Core continues to fulfill its purpose, assessments were taken with regard to the Reading and Writing Intensive Core Seminar courses and the Quantitative Reasoning courses as well as the COMPASS workshops. The findings of these assessments have resulted in some enhancements to this year's workshops.

And this past summer, the Summer Semesters which offered the majority of the courses on-line - exceeded estimates by generating \$225,000 in new revenue for the College.

There has been real progress in the realm of undergraduate studies. The graduate studies division is also expanding with the addition of a new MBA in Healthcare Management, Certificate of Graduate Study in Addiction Counseling, and Resiliency for the Helping Professions certificates.

As the College has done in the past during its challenging periods, we have introduced new programs to expand our reach and relevance, but we cannot rest on these programs alone. Feasibility studies are underway with regard to nursing, physician's assistant and cybersecurity, three highly in-demand fields consistent with our liberal arts mission that will no doubt increase interest in the College amongst groups of students who normally might not consider Assumption.

One program in particular that generates significant interest in Assumption is the Rome Campus. Both the fall and spring semesters have welcomed full classes with great interest among the class of 2021 who wish to experience this unique opportunity. Due to this growing interest, we introduced a new four-week program this summer, designed for those students who are unable to participate in study abroad during the academic year due to the requirements of their academic programs, their role as RAs or their participation in athletics.

With regard to our student-athletes, they continue to take seriously their commitment to academics attaining a cumulative grade point average exceeding 3.0 for the third straight year. They are ranked nationally with an Academic Success Rating of 93 percent.

Outside of the classroom, student-athletes have made an impact throughout the NCAA.

Football was ranked number 15 in the nation and again competed in the NCAA Tournament; Women's Cross Country competed in the National Championships for the first time in program history; and Men's Ice Hockey recorded upsets in the NE10 Semifinals and Championship to win its first-ever Championship.

In addition to fulfilling the academic and athletic needs of our students, Assumption also nourishes their souls through Campus Ministry. This year, Campus Ministry introduced the new Student Leader Association, a group of 60 students who will represent the approximate 50 groups and programs at Assumption that have an affiliation to Campus Ministry.

Besides providing these leadership opportunities for students, Campus Ministry also secured a grant that was used to fund and sponsor new Lenten programming to raise on-campus awareness about the timely topics of refugees and immigration.

The Assumption College mission calls for the transformation of the complete person, which includes a commitment to students' physical and mental wellness. To better serve our students, the College renovated Armanet House, which now houses the College's newly named "Wellness Center"; a facility that conveniently offers both health and counseling services. The Wellness Model was adopted here to advance best practices for health care and prevention efforts reflective of a holistic approach to caring for students with health or mental health needs.

Counselors from the Center have created an "Active Minds Chapter" which exists to empower students to take leadership roles in promulgating accurate information about those living with the challenges of mental health issues. To raise awareness on campus to this issue, we, along with the other Colleges in Worcester, will host a fair in conjunction with Fresh Check Day, an initiative of the city, on October 20th.

Also benefitting our students is a new housing selection process that was implemented and replaces the outdated lottery system.

Much of what I have shared- these enhancements to our academic and campus life environments- are no doubt positive changes that will encourage interest amongst prospective students and their families.

Despite enrollment challenges, the College received its fourth highest number of applications on record last year. Of those that enrolled at Assumption this year, the 3.47 average GPA is the highest on record. 81 students in the new class are among "Ability 1" students, the highest

percentage of the total class on record. And 20 percent of the new class is ALANA, the second highest percentage on record.

The College also exceeded internal recruiting goals by welcoming 165 new student-athletes. These student-athletes not only hail from New England, but also from states throughout the south, mid-west, the mid-Atlantic and even Hawaii. These non-traditional recruitment areas are critical to increasing enrollment given the decline of college-aged individuals and the number of colleges in New England.

In addition to increased interest among prospective students and their families, alumni and friends of the College are increasing their commitment to their alma mater.

As the College begins to emerge from the silent phase of the Capital Campaign, I am pleased to report a tremendous response with regard to our fundraising efforts, which demonstrates the commitment of our alumni and benefactors, as well as their confidence in the College and its direction.

- Alumni giving increased 2 percent over the previous year, with more than \$1.1 million raised for the Assumption Fund.
- For our capital campaign, we have raised to date in total over \$24.6 million, \$16.9 million of which has been designated for the new Tsotsis Family Academic Center, a majority of which was raised in the last two years.

Assumption College has a remarkable story to share and one of the ways in which we share that story will also transform. This January, the College will introduce a new design and focus of our flagship publication, *Assumption Magazine*. In addition to providing a considerable cost savings, the *Magazine* will more effectively:

- Represent our brand;
- Support the vision as set forth in the Strategic Plan; and
- Engage our various audiences.

Our operational budget, or day-to-day funding, is dependent upon enrollment. When enrollment decreases, so do financial resources. These resources cover operational expenses such as utilities and compensation. As you know, our endowment and long-term investments, which amounts to \$114 million, is mostly restricted. We cannot simply access endowment resources for day-to-day operations. Many generous individuals have selflessly supported the College, but have done so with strict restrictions on how their funds can be used. We must, and will, honor those intentions.

As you can see, despite our current situation, we are forging ahead from a position of strength. We do so as our predecessors did when they faced similar challenges at many junctures throughout the history of the College. As I mentioned before, these challenges are not new nor

foreign, rather obstacles we must overcome to redefine our place in the educational landscape, from which we will emerge stronger.

By its nature, Assumption College is an institution of resilience. Since 1904, the College has endured a number of pivotal moments when people of good will and character came together for the sake of the students, and the institution itself, to ensure that the College not only survived, but moved forward.

- When World War I began, many of the French-speaking faculty fled to Europe to minister to troops.
 - The institution adapted, endured and thrived
- The economic calamities of the Great Depression resulted in a significant decrease in enrollment.
 - The institution adapted, endured and thrived
- When enrollment of French-speaking students declined, the institution transformed from French-only instruction, serving the French community, to, for the first time, include English instruction to appeal to a broader market.
 - The institution adapted, endured and thrived
- A tornado that took life and destroyed much of the former campus. Instead of accepting defeat, a wise and visionary decision was made to separate Assumption Prep from Assumption College and establish a new location for the College.
 - Here, at the new Salisbury Street location, was renewed what we know today as Assumption College.
- Recognizing the need to quickly increase enrollment and enhance the student experience, in September 1969, the College would open its doors to women for the first time, again appealing to a broader market.
 - The institution adapted, endured and thrived
- Financial challenges in the 1960s and 1970s forced regular instances of cost cutting and staff reductions.
 - Yet, the institution adapted, endured and thrived
- A decision to add Business Studies to the academic offerings.
 - Again, the institution adapted, endured and thrived with the new academic building now hosting this robust department.
- The decision to offer graduate degrees providing new sources of revenue but additional opportunities to impart upon students the knowledge of Assumption professors.
- And today, we are once again witnessing a pivotal moment that calls upon us to seize the day, act boldly and creatively so that when future generations look back on this period they will see that we too adapted, endured and thrived.

When faced with these challenging periods in the history of the College, rather than succumb to external pressure beyond the institution's control, the entire institution put aside personal differences and collaborated to develop a stronger and more resilient institution. Will we follow the path chosen by our predecessors for the sake of future generations of Assumption faculty,

staff or students, or allow ego and pride to burden our collective efforts? Will we continue to look through the rear-view mirror rehashing old debates that simply stagnate the institution as our direct competitors whisk by us leaving us behind? Or will we look forward and be innovative in ways that will allow us to grow and be leaders among our peers, rather than always playing catch-up? This, is a decision we must all make. Right now.

It's well known that I am far more versed on Renaissance and Reformation History rather than sports. However, I do enjoy watching baseball – a game of strategy both in and out of season. There is much we can learn and adopt from the 2016 World Champion Chicago Cubs. After a drought of 108 years without a championship – at the time the longest in professional sports – in a very dramatic fashion, the team came from behind to defeat the Cleveland Indians. How, after 108 years, did the team overcome the continuous disappointment of close calls and crushed dreams to earn an extraordinary victory?

In building the 2016 team, the Cubs carefully selected their team, assembling a group of individuals of “good character” who would, with each at bat, fielded ball and hit, work for the good of the team, not self. An environment was developed in which the players felt they were part of something larger than themselves and only if they worked together, could they achieve their collective goal.

I know, and have much confidence, in the team we have here at Assumption. – all of us. We have people of extraordinary character and significant talent. Such is demonstrated in the long and arduous hours each of you work, the time you take to teach and mentor our students or the research you conduct, often in collaboration with students. This institution will endure and it will thrive. However, to do so, we must look forward, and not backward. We must leave our differences in the past and, instead, work for the collective good of our students and the institution. We must be a collective group of passionate individuals of good character committed to making an impact and overcoming these short term challenges. We must be a collective group that cares about our students and the future of Assumption College.

We must ask ourselves a simple, yet profound question: Will we band together for our students and Assumption College, or will we allow divisive, personal differences to hinder our success?

Throughout Assumption's history, former leaders, faculty and staff have responded to such pivotal moments with courage and determination. They acted from a place that was more than just mere survival. The College innovated, survived and endured for a simple reason: because its faculty, staff and administration, throughout its 113-year history, has cared about the future of the institution and its students.

I want to be very clear. Assumption College:

- will continue to innovate;
- will continue to be a resilient institution of higher learning;
- will respond to the needs of the market;

- will make bold investments in areas that will attract new students and best serve those who have chosen Assumption; and
- will endure yet another pivotal moment in the history of this institution without sacrificing our defining mission as a Catholic, Assumptionist liberal arts institution.

Only together will we thrive in this challenging time for all of higher education. The choice is simple and clear - what will you choose?

May God bless our efforts and Assumption College.