



Assumption University  
500 Salisbury Street  
Worcester, MA 10609  
508.555.5555  
assumption.edu

## Convocation 2018

President Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D.

As we start this new academic year, we do so from a position of greater strength as compared to last year. Amid external pressures beyond our control, we have endured the challenges of the past year and emerged with a larger new class who will benefit from a number of new academic programs as we recommit ourselves to the success of the institution and our students.

Regardless of our differences, we share a simple, but important, passion: providing the finest liberal arts education to our students as they prepare for personally and professionally fulfilling careers and lives or the pursuit of additional study. It is this passion that inspired us in the last academic year, yet one that also created divisions within our community.

During the last academic year, I often reflected upon words spoken by one of our nation's preeminent statesmen.

160 years ago amid national tensions we continue to debate today, a candidate from Illinois running for the United States Senate spoke simple words that have guided nations and institutions through times of unrest and disagreement.

A house divided against itself cannot stand. *[REPEAT]* A house divided against itself cannot stand.

When the Venerable Father Emmanuel d'Alzon envisioned the idea of Assumptionist sponsored schools, he believed that such an institution must evolve to meet the needs of the time. Assumption has remained true to this vision, recognizing that we need not compromise the essence of who we are, rather we must embrace societal realities such as market demand or need. But we do so without compromising our mission, nor our foundation as a liberal arts institution.

Recent years have been marked by difficult decisions, decisions made with the best long-term interest of the institution, in particular our students, in mind. Programs with majors in the single digits were eliminated providing resources for new academic programs with a significant demand among our target demographic: Nursing, Cybersecurity, Data Analytics and soon, a Physician Assistant program. Not only are these fields in demand by those engaging in the

college search process, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts continued job growth in these areas into the future.

When majors were eliminated, some assumed and unfairly charged that Assumption had abandoned its commitment to the liberal arts. Such is simply false. While some majors were eliminated many minors were retained in these disciplines, and in all instances courses are still being offered in the impacted disciplines. The liberal arts is at the center of our academic programs and will remain as such. The needs of our time have changed, and while Assumption's list of majors and minors evolves, our liberal arts core will always remain at the center of our mission and the foundation for all of our academic programs.

Like many, I, too, was initially skeptical of how some of these new academic programs would conform to our mission and liberal arts curriculum. However, it is our liberal arts curriculum that makes our graduates so versatile. Through our Core, students are introduced to essential works, ideas and enduring goals of the liberal arts and sciences. Emphasizing the humanizing role that disciplines such as Philosophy, Theology, Literature and Political Science play in the tradition of Catholic higher education, the Core contributes to the formation of thoughtful citizens committed to the pursuit of lifelong learning. Through our solid liberal arts curriculum, we are forming individuals to excel and become leaders in a number of fields. The liberal arts provides a body of knowledge that makes one more human and fosters a mindset that appreciates what it means to be human as our students discover the true, the good and the beautiful.

Despite the challenges faced by faculty, administrators and staff—budget cuts, extra workloads, and passionate disagreements—we emerged from this last year a stronger institution, academically and financially. I thank you for your continued commitment and dedication to our students and the College's mission.

Because of your tireless efforts, and despite the systemic challenges facing higher education, our recruitment efforts exceeded expectations:

- 554 first-year students enrolled at the College this September
- 29 percent are first generation students
- Members of the Class of 2022 hail from 16 states – including states from outside of our traditional recruiting area
- 23 countries are now represented among our student body
- The average GPA of the incoming class is an impressive 3.45, one of the highest on record.

Recruiting this class was not the effort of a few, rather the collective many – including many of you. We can all celebrate the accomplishments of the last year.

These new students arrived at Assumption with interests that differ from incoming classes of 10 or even five years ago. The need to develop new academic programs that will sate their curiosity is critical to retention and attracting new students.

A Dean of Nursing, Caitlin Stover, Ph.D., has been hired to continue the development of the College's new Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program that will begin next fall. Upon receipt of pre-requisite approval for the new program, the College immediately submitted an application for initial approval status. Once approved, the College may accept students for the BSN Program. Planning is underway for the construction of a new academic building that will provide the learning environment necessary for both nursing and Physician Assistant Studies, which is being developed under the leadership of Dr. Michael Whitehead, our new Director of Physician Assistant Studies.

We also welcome Ray Albert, Ph.D., from the University of Maine system, the founding director of our Cybersecurity program, which welcomed students this fall. Through this program, Assumption students will engage in intense academic preparation to pursue a number of in-demand careers in the private, nonprofit and government sectors. The next step for this program is achieving a Center of Academic Excellence credential offered by the National Security Administration.

A new major in Neuroscience – with cellular and psychology tracks - is now an option for Assumption students as well as a Center for Neuroscience thanks to the collaborative effort of faculty in the Natural Sciences and Psychology. The Center offers students new research internships, community outreach, lectures, career fairs and other co-curricular events.

Two weeks ago, reflecting the global presence of the Assumptionists, the College celebrated the opening of our Center for Global Studies where internationally focused academic and study abroad programs, international internships, and Catholic Relief Services collaborate to provide a comprehensive experience for students interested in global learning, in particular, the Global Studies major and minor. The new Center will encourage students to develop a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of the world and its history, diverse cultures and customs, geography and economics.

Learning at Assumption is not limited to the traditional fall and spring semesters.

Thanks to many faculty who continued teaching into the summer months, the College's summer semester program, which is now offered almost exclusively on-line, experienced additional growth: 233 undergraduates enrolled in 38 courses. The 351 total enrollments is a 25 percent increase over summer 2017, generating revenue in excess of \$300,000.

A new Mentor Collective Program was instituted this summer in which 388 Assumption students served as peer mentors for first-year students. Peer mentors were paired with their mentees during orientation where they answered questions and provided support to the

incoming class. In only its first year, more than 1,200 conversations have been reported by the 510 mentor- mentee pairs.

And finally, the Career Development and Internship Center continues to marshal the resources of the institution, our alumni, and local employers by connecting students and graduates to internships and jobs. According to a recent survey, the Center found that:

- 94 percent of the Class of 2017 were employed, pursuing additional education, or engaged in community service within six months of graduation.
- 84 percent of the Class of 2018 participated in undergraduate research, internships, service learning, and/or student teaching opportunities.

Thanks to our exemplary faculty and staff, Assumption students are well-prepared to enter the workforce or pursue additional study upon completion of their undergraduate degrees.

In the workforce, our alumni have become leaders in their chosen field; leaders who continue their affinity for their alma mater and demonstrate such with their generosity.

The Light the Way Capital Campaign for Assumption College has raised a total of over \$30.1 million, 86 percent of the campaign goal of \$35 million in just two and a half years. Besides raising funds for our premier academic facility, the Tsotsis Family Academic Center, funds have been raised for the endowment (in particular student financial aid, faculty scholarship and research and Campus Ministry). Now our focus is on improvements to our athletic facilities.

In addition, the Assumption Fund reported a 28 percent increase in giving over last year for a total of \$1.5 million, and a new record for highest amount ever raised in one year for the Assumption Fund. Of that total, \$891,000 is unrestricted – a 56 percent increase. Because of our efforts in this area, Assumption College has been recognized with a 2018 CASE Educational Fundraising Award, an honor given each year to superior fundraising programs at educational institutions across the country. We were among a group of 90 colleges, universities, and independent schools receiving this year's award. Assumption College was selected to receive the award based on the judges' analysis of three years of fundraising data submitted to the annual Voluntary Support of Education Survey. We were one of only six institutions to receive this recognition in our category of institutions with endowments of approximately \$100 million or less.

Last year at this time, we were seeking \$3 million in cuts to ensure a balanced budget. Thanks to your careful and responsible stewardship of the resources entrusted to us by the trustees, students, their parents, and alumni, not only did we achieve that balanced budget, but realized a surplus that exceeded \$400,000. As I stated earlier this year to the Finance Committee and Trustees, I insisted that any surplus be earmarked for raises.

I am pleased that this year, not only were eligible employees awarded raises, but also bonuses. Thank you for your tireless efforts to curb spending while maintaining exceptional programs and services for our students.

Our endowment remains strong at \$108 million and despite the challenging outlook for the higher education industry, the College maintained its A- Standard and Poor's rating.

Responsible stewardship of the financial resources entrusted to the College not only enabled the institution to provide raises and bonuses, but also to enhance facilities for our students.

Some of the noteworthy enhancements include the development of a new, spacious lounge in Alumni Hall and the modernization of showers in residence halls. I am also proud of the work underway in the IT Building to convert two adjoining spaces into a Veterans Lounge, one of many steps the College is taking to develop services and programs to active-duty military and veterans, a population that deserves our support as we focus on becoming a Veterans-friendly institution.

Knowing that satisfaction is key to student recruitment and retention, the College introduced new - or expanded existing - services for students in the last year.

Perhaps the most popular was the Uber for Business subsidized rides program. This innovative thinking resulted in Assumption becoming one of the first colleges in New England to provide such a service.

The Cross Cultural Center continues to provide our ALANA students with engaging programs, which are now led by a coordinator who also serves as a mentor, connecting students of color with on campus resources. A graduate assistant assists the coordinator making the Assumption experience an inclusive one backed by a community of caring individuals, as we explore a permanent leadership model for this important Office on campus.

In recent weeks, the College has been recognized by many organizations for its effectiveness and excellence in academics, including *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Princeton Review*, *the Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes*. External organizations have also recognized specific programs at the College.

The [SOPHIA Program](#) was recognized with a Best Practices in Mission Integration Award by the Association of Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities. The award recognizes those institutions whose programs have a positive impact on student learning; successfully address student and/or campus needs; are original and creative; possess a foundation in Catholic identity; and make practical use of research or assessment.

The Campus Labs Assessment and Research Organization recognized the College with a "trailblazer award" for our commitment to innovation in the practice of assessment.

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In the classroom and in competition, our student-athletes continue to impress throughout the region.

This past year Assumption finished 14th among all Division II schools by posting an Academic Success Rate of 93 percent, marking the seventh straight year our student-athletes finished in the top-15 nationally. Our student-athletes posted a cumulative GPA of 3.11, a school record.

Last year the College's 24 athletic teams completed over 3,700 hours of community service. Numerous programs partnered with Team IMPACT to draft local children with serious illnesses to become a part of their program, while men's ice hockey also raised over \$4,000 for the Lt. Scott Milley Fund with its Military Appreciation Game and women's swimming also raised more than \$4,000 with its Swim Across America fundraiser.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the success of last year's football team that competed in the NCAA Division II Quarterfinals for the first time in program history finishing the season ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the nation. One player on the team, Cole Tracy, through his early success at Louisiana State University, has generated national attention for the College.

At the core of our mission and this institution is the faith, wisdom, and guidance provided by the Augustinians of the Assumption.

With a focus on the theme of immigration, the Office of Mission celebrated "Founders Week" a recognition of the Augustinians of the Assumption who founded and continue to sponsor the College. Founders Week was an opportunity for community-wide reflection on the impact of the Assumptionists here in Worcester and abroad as well as personal reflection on the issue of immigration.

In closing, to once again quote Abraham Lincoln, "We shall not fail -- if we stand firm, we shall not fail."

The past year is one that concluded with a number of successes, however, complacency is not an option. We must continue to reimagine the College and to innovate since our peers are not standing still. The restructuring process underway is at the heart of this re-imagination.

We are cognizant that colleges and universities across the country will continue to struggle with declining demographics for a number of years, therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us to share with prospective students and their families the value of an Assumption education – an education built atop a formidable liberal arts foundation.

While we should be proud of and celebrate the enrollment of the new students this fall, we must maintain or increase this number next year and in years to come. I am confident that if we continue to cast aside our differences and work together for the benefit of the institution and our students, Assumption College will endure the marketplace challenges and continue to

produce graduates who are known for critical intelligence, thoughtful citizenship and compassionate service.

May our shared passion inspire and motivate all of us to work together in this upcoming year. May God bless you and Assumption College. Thank you.