

# 2015 “State of the University” Address

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## *Introduction*

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 – or “USF,” as we like to call it.

Thank you for joining us for our 2<sup>nd</sup> annual USF Ambassador Day. If you didn’t already consider yourself so, today you officially become part of the USF family – and an “ambassador” for what this university is all about. As a family, we’re going to share with you our points of pride so that they become your points of pride, as well.

That way, the next time you’re done talking about your children’s achievements... or have put away the cutest photos ever of your grandchildren... or finished discussing your company’s growth... perhaps you’ll also talk a bit about USF’s students, about how USF is growing and serving the community in new and exciting ways, and about how bright the future of higher education can be at a school that is committed to preparing women and men to contribute to the world through service and leadership.

Please feel free to continue enjoying your breakfast during my remarks. Sharing a meal together is very much a Franciscan tradition. We hope you enjoy the food our wonderful Sodexo team has prepared!

It’s wonderful that so many of you have made time in your busy schedules to be with us here this morning. And, at the risk of singling only some of you out, I’d like to acknowledge the presence of so many of our elected leaders – at all levels of government – who are with us this morning.

In addition to these leaders, I also am pleased to welcome the many members of our USF Board of Trustees who are with us today, as well as a member of our Sponsoring Congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate.

Of course, whether you are a member of one of our Colleges’ Advisory Councils, a business or banking partner, a neighbor, employee, or just had nothing better to do, welcome!

So, what is the “State of the University”?

I’m pleased to report that the State of the University of St. Francis is strong... and even “golden” – for those of you familiar with our marketing efforts.

This fall's enrollments are up 3% *versus* a year ago – thanks, in large part, to the strength of our graduate degree program portfolio – and at a six-year high. Indeed, over the past five years, the University's net tuition revenues are up almost 18% – so that we have successfully avoided the “tuition discount trap” that has snared so many of our peers in the quest for enrollment numbers. Total revenues are up over 24% at the same time that we increased net assets by over 44% and endowment by almost 70%. Additionally, in each of the past three fiscal years, we operated with a surplus of at least \$1 million.

In terms of this year's entering classes, I'm pleased to report that, as we intentionally seek to better reflect the ethnicity of the communities that we serve, the number of minority students that we enroll continues to grow – and comprises 40 percent of this fall's freshman and transfer students. As in past years, about two-thirds of our entering freshmen are the first in their families to attend college. With an average ACT composite score of 23.2 and an average high school GPA of 3.42, our freshman class is among the most academically prepared in the past decade.

The bottom line is that USF is well-positioned for future success and growth. And, speaking of the future...

In 2020, USF will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary – 100 years of serving and leading. The strategic plan that I shared with you last year identified 5 top-level objectives – summarized on this chart and available at your tables – by which the University of St. Francis will not only prepare for its second century but also ensure that USF continues to fulfill its mission of preparing students to contribute to the world through service and leadership.

Last year, I provided you with a one-page, qualitative summary of the strategic plan and offered to provide you with a copy of the complete plan – including our quantitative goals and milestones. In fact, the University community has spent the past few months reviewing and updating the plan, and I thought that updating you on our implementation of the plan would be a great way to structure my remarks this morning.

### *Objective 1: A Leading Catholic Franciscan University*

Our first – and most important – objective reaffirms USF's commitment to becoming a leading Catholic Franciscan university. Specifically, the University aims to increase students and employees' understanding of Catholic Franciscan values and Catholic Social Teaching – especially through orientation programs and a redesign of the General Education curriculum.

As importantly, this includes a recommitment to increasing the diversity of our students and employees – evidence of which you can see in this year's entering freshman and transfer classes, as I mentioned earlier.

This objective is all about who we are – as called forth in our mission – and it ensures that we will remain true to legacy of our founding congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate, who are completing the celebration of 150 years of ministry this year. Without the love, service, and leadership of these “Joliet Franciscans”, Joliet would not be what it is today – nor would USF’s foundation for the future be as strong as it is. To that end, I would like to pause and thank Our Sisters for their ministries of service and leadership. Thank you!

Our mission calls us to be a “welcoming community of learners”; and, to that end, I am proud to report that, whether in our classrooms, our laboratories, the streets of downtown Joliet (especially when we “Light Up the Holidays”), or on the Quad, our focus on “intentional community building” creates a warm, friendly environment in which everyone has a sense of belonging... a sense of “being home.”

Our students are excellent, proud, ready, and supported. They’re ready to “step up to higher ground”...and to “rise up and shine on.” They’re ready to “pursue their ultimate good” and to “be a saint.” In short, they’re “golden”!

Our mission also calls us to “prepare women and men to contribute to the world through service and leadership.” We do this by “making real” our Franciscan values of respect, integrity, service, and compassion.

- Through RESPECT, we recognize that we are all children of God – worthy of reverence and with inherent dignity;
- Through INTEGRITY, we accept personal responsibility for our actions and commit ourselves to the highest ethical standards;
- Through COMPASSION, we commit ourselves to loving our neighbors as ourselves – promoting empathy, forgiveness, and peace in the global community; and
- Through SERVICE, we integrate the other values with a bias toward action – as we put others’ needs before our own and recognize the divine, the Good present in others.

And, boy do our students, our employees, and our alumni serve! Whether working in storm-damaged areas, preparing meals for those in need, or countless other efforts, we are called to serve and called to lead.

### *Objective 2: Building the Brand and Telling Our Story*

Objective two’s focus is on ensuring that USF thrives in an increasingly challenging higher education environment by enhancing its regional reputation and brand awareness as a leading private Midwestern university with excellent student educational outcomes. This includes more intentionally promoting our accreditations and the achievements of our students, organizations, and alumni as well as improving our rankings in “best” quality listings.

In short, we need to tell – better and more widely – “our story” ... sharing our “good news” and our impact.

USF’s diverse portfolio of programs – in arts and sciences, business, education, nursing and health care, and social work – along with on-site and online delivery options provide a strong foundation for the future.

USF is proud to serve over 3,900 students including nearly 3,300 Illinois residents – and to count among its alumni nearly 20,000 Illinois residents, 7,200 Will County residents, and 2,275 Joliet residents. Our employees live here and support the community, too — with 400 living in Will County and 175 here in Joliet. In fact, and as I’ve shared before, USF annually adds \$173 million to the Joliet and Chicago Metropolitan area economies – including \$64 million to the Will County economy and \$2 million in direct benefits to the City of Joliet.

With 47,000 alumni nationwide, the results and impact of a USF education can be seen and felt far and wide – especially as a result of our long history in both distance and online education. USF remains relevant in programming, financially healthy, and well-positioned to meet the needs of the future.

Just one quick example: Did you know that the University of St. Francis is the only university in the State of Illinois to offer a bachelor’s degree in Substance Abuse Counseling? Given the national shortage of employees trained in this area and increasing problems with drug abuse even right here in Will County, it’s hard to think of a better, more relevant example of USF meeting the needs of our community... as we always have ...and as Our Sisters always have. That’s mission integration!

Our relevance is also evidenced in our outcomes. We are “effective and affordable” – as I’ve shared with you before and hope to reinforce today.

Indeed, an important part of our strategic plan is focused on “building the USF brand.” By fine-tuning and more widely exposing our “public” identity, more people will become aware of and invested in USF’s exciting future. And, of course, that’s where you come in – as our ambassadors. At your tables, you’ll find this year’s update of our “Effective and Affordable” piece for you to take home and reference as you help to tell our story. It’s facts and figures that you’ll find of use.

And, because you’re our ambassadors, you are among the first to receive a copy of the latest-and-greatest issue of the newly-renamed *Engaging Mind and Spirit* – our University of St. Francis magazine. Now, since you’ll probably be getting another copy in the mail in the next week or so, please think about with whom you can share your “bonus copy.”

As I shared last year, our new logo and our updated tagline – “Bigger thinking. Brighter purpose.” – celebrate both the liberal arts roots of a University of St. Francis education (bigger thinking) and our Franciscan heritage (brighter purpose).

And, as I mentioned earlier, at USF, our students are “golden” – i.e., excellent, proud, ready, supported, etc. – and our new marketing materials seek to communicate that as we welcome our students “home.”

To that end, I’m sure that you’ve noticed our new look prominently displayed on billboards on I-55, I-80, and other major roadways – as well as heard our “Bigger thinking. Brighter purpose.” tagline chirping in radio spots on several of our major radio stations.

There’s much more to come!

### *Objective 3: High-quality Academic and Co-curricular Programs*

Clearly, one of the most important ways that we deliver on this promise is through our high-quality academic and co-curricular programs, which is the focus of the third objective of our strategic plan.

In order to continue to build the quality of our programs, USF has invested in growing our number of full-time faculty members – and we have done so in each of the past three years. In addition, through increased emphasis on student achievement and experiential learning opportunities, we look to increase our already-admirable graduation and employment rates – in order to continue to provide a positive “return on investment” to our students.

Our degree programs are fully accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and we are especially proud of the specialized accreditation that our programs have earned from national associations that require rigorous standards.

These include:

- the Council on Social Work Education;
- the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions;
- the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs;
- the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for Physician Assistants;
- the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education; and
- the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

The quality of our degree programs is also attested to by outside rankings:

- For the 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, USF was ranked in the top tier of *U.S. News & World Report’s* Regional Midwest Universities, with recognitions for our grad school programs, our online programs, and our offerings for veterans.
- USF has again been named a “College of Distinction” by *CollegesofDistinction.com*, as well as a “Military-Friendly School” by *G.I. Jobs Magazine*.
- USF has again been rated “Best in the Midwest” by *The Princeton Review*.

The University was also recently recognized by a few new organizations – including *OnlineMastersPrograms.org*, which gave high rankings to our Health Care Administration

program; the *Brookings Institute*, who honored us for having “added value” in our program offerings; and *Value Colleges*, which ranked us in its list of “50 Best Value” Online RN-BSN programs.

USF continues to excel, and it’s being noticed!

In fact, while it’s not without its controversy and even detractors, the US Department of Education’s recently-released “College Scorecard” provides a testament to the effectiveness and impact of a University of St. Francis education.

While the cost to attend USF is rated at about the national average, our graduation rate, first-year retention rate, percent of students paying down their debt, and student salaries after attending are all rated above the national average. We’re understandably pleased by this; but, we’re also committed to continued progress and improvement across these metrics. It’s in our students’ best interests!

Indeed, our students, our graduates are the people you want to hire and see in your hospitals and health care facilities, in your classrooms, and in your businesses.

One of the most important indicators of our success is the fact that our students find jobs or go on to graduate school – with 98 percent reporting that they are employed and/or attending graduate school within six months after graduation, with 72 percent employed in their field of study.

Thanks to our excellent internship opportunities – made possible by many of you here today – our undergraduates participate in a variety of experiential learning opportunities, so they are prepared to hit the ground running upon graduation. In fact, last year, 77% of our students participated in some sort of experiential or service learning. And, as noted on your “Effective and Affordable” handout, our students continue to pass national tests and licensure exams at rates far higher than the national average – with near-100-percent pass-rates in our education, nursing, and physician assistant programs.

Last year, I notified you that we were establishing an MBA program in the Czech Republic – in partnership with the Brno University of Technology. This program is alive and thriving – with two student cohorts active there and a third set to launch in February. This is not only an important way by which we can bring the value – and impact – of a USF MBA degree to students who might not otherwise be able to benefit from it but also a valuable international teaching experience for our College of Business & Health Administration faculty, who teach many of the courses.

The University of St. Francis is as competitive on the playing fields as in the classroom!

Last year, 14 of our 21 teams advanced to post-season play – an achievement that resulted in USF’s highest-ever ranking in the NAIA’s Learfield Cup standing. More impressively – and importantly, as they are student-athletes, after all! – our spring teams earned an overall 3.15 GPA, and 46 students were named NAIA Scholar-Athletes!

This year, USF cheers on a record number of student-athletes; and, three of our fall sports teams have been consistently ranked in NAIA's Top-25! Go Fighting Saints!

#### *Objective 4: Building Financial Capacity*

Our strategic plan is also concerned with continuing to build the financial capacity of the University of St. Francis – so that we will have the resources to invest strategically in our future.

Our students are a big part of our future – and the reason why we do what we do – so they remain the focus of a significant, on-going investment by the University. In order to ensure that we're not only effective but also affordable, USF annually provides over \$18 million in institutional scholarships and other institutional aid to our students.

This helps to keep our average student debt at graduation at a manageable level – as evidenced by the fact that USF students have maintained a loan default rate that is significantly lower than the national and state averages. With so many of our students being the first in their families to attend college, they are both financially responsible and grateful for the help they receive.

In addition to our institutional support, we also remain affordable because of the generosity of our loyal benefactors – including so many of you in this room. To date, more than \$4 million in scholarship support has been raised through the annual Caritas Scholarship Ball, which is the university's biggest fundraiser each year.

In fact, please mark your calendars for January 23, 2016—just a few months away—for our next fantastic event, which will be held at Bolingbrook Golf Club. This year's Caritas Scholarship Ball will be chaired by good friends of the university and Joliet: Terry & Sue D'Arcy.

A major focus of objective four is investing in the facilities and capabilities necessary to deliver on our mission. As you walk around campus today, you will see many new improvements – even since last year. Just one example: The Abbey in the Marian residence hall was renovated and opened up to create a large space for student community-building — complete with study tables, bistro tables, beautiful furniture, and game tables. Also, the next time you're out on the Quad, I invite you to walk the path alongside the brand new Stations of the Cross that were recently installed outside of the Motherhouse!

This past year, we formally dedicated the “Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise Center” in downtown Joliet in recognition of a generous gift from the Plaster Foundation. The Plaster Center houses a business incubator with four “residents” as well as a mock trial courtroom. It is a state-of-the-art learning environment that serves hundreds of students each week and houses our Criminal and Social Justice; Recreation and Sport Management; Transportation and Logistics; and History and Political Science programs.

As I previewed for you last year, in 2016, our Leach College of Nursing will move to new facilities at our St. Clare Campus – just up Plainfield Road from here – in a building that we’re calling “Guardian Angel Hall” in recognition of both its historical roots and the role that our nurses play in caring for their patients’ health.

The College of Nursing has outgrown its present facilities in Donovan Hall, and the new facilities at St. Clare Campus will not only allow more students to be enrolled but also provide an even better learning experience and environment.

This over \$9 million renovation to Guardian Angel Hall and the St. Clare site will result in

- wonderful student study and research spaces;
- dozens of faculty offices;
- 2 state-of-the-art “Skills Labs”;
- 6 new, technology-enabled classrooms; and
- 4 “SIMulation Labs” that will enable us to educate more students without more clinical placements.

With the expanded facilities available at Guardian Angel Hall, the Leach College of Nursing plans to increase our full-time undergraduate enrollments by up to 50% – or an additional 160 students. We will also have other degree delivery options available there. More importantly, with these new facilities, we will ensure that our nurses remain the best prepared in their fields and the most passionate in their profession – with our Franciscan values of respect, service, integrity and compassion to guide them.

Another big part of our strategic plan includes an expansion and deepening of USF’s long-time commitment to math and science education – whether in new teacher preparation, nursing education, or new life science majors – to be supported by enhanced facilities including a new science building, upon which we hope to break ground this coming spring – with classes being offered there in Fall 2017.

Importantly, and excitedly, this will mark the first “Main Campus” construction/expansion project to be launched in over 30 years. It will be “sited” in the parking lot at the corner of Wilcox and Douglas streets on the North end of Tower Hall (for continuity with the science labs and classrooms that will not be included in the new building) and will create an “extended Quad” across from the Sullivan Center.

While we’re still in the midst of the design process – working with the firm of Holabird and Root, who are well-experienced in science building design and construction – present plans envision a three-story, 40,000-square-foot building that will house state-of-the-art learning spaces for our students – as well as spaces in which student-faculty interactions can be enhanced.

These will include:

- Teaching Laboratories and Laboratory Support Spaces;
- Faculty-Student Research Laboratories;



- Faculty Offices;
- “Student Commons” Areas;
- Meeting/Conference Rooms;
- a Multi-purpose, Reconfigurable Lecture Hall; and
- a Rooftop Garden Patio/Reception Area.

This plan has been in the works for a long time, and we were thrilled to receive recently a seven-figure gift, pledged by alumni Bill and Trish Bellah, to launch the campaign for this facility.

### *Objective 5: A Destination Employer*

Our fifth – and final – objective relates to taking care of our people: the faculty, staff, and administrators who dedicate their service to our students.

Even in my comparatively brief time at the University of St. Francis – after all, this is only my “junior year”! – I have come to understand that our competitive advantage is our people. Our faculty members are world-class teachers, who make educating our students their number one priority. And, our administrators and staff members work tirelessly to care for our students.

To that end, it is both appropriate and just – not to mention strategic – that the University has committed to providing internal mentoring and professional support and to encouraging and celebrating external development, research, and peer collaboration.

The bottom line is that the USF family can’t be beat! But, this “family” is much more than just our employees – as important and wonderful as they may be.

Our family includes...

- Our students, who are not only talented but also compassionate and committed to improving the lives of others through service and leadership;
- Our alumni, who are not only the best at what they do but also credit USF for what they have accomplished; and
- Our local community members, whether elected officials, businesses, other organizations, or neighbors – in other words, each and every one of you, who are true partners in every sense of that word.

I meet with USF students, alumni, and friends wherever and whenever I can – to learn about who they are, what they do, and the unique experiences that bond them to the University of St. Francis. And, in all these interactions, I have conversations about the hopes and aspirations that we all share for the University.

I believe that USF has all the pieces in place to become one of the nation’s finest Catholic Franciscan institutions. And, just in case you can’t tell, I truly believe that I have the greatest job in the world!

Thank you for being with us this morning – and for being “ambassadors” for the University of St. Francis. We are grateful for your time and support...and your membership in the ever-growing “USF Family.”

Finally, in another Franciscan tradition, I wish you “pace e bene” – peace and all good things!

Thank you!