



Associated Colleges of Illinois

University of St. Francis Offers Students 'Bigger Thinking, Brighter Purpose'

Joliet university focuses on liberal arts education, emphasizes respect, integrity, compassion and service

Like most liberal arts institutions of higher education, the University of St. Francis (USF) in Joliet educates students for careers in a variety of fields. But there's more. Woven throughout the academic curriculum and campus life are USF's four core values, central to the Roman Catholic university's Franciscan values and charism: respect, integrity, compassion and service.



Students visiting the campus consistently hear these values, says USF President Arvid C. Johnson, and they see and hear how servant-leader students, faculty and staff carry them out.

"We're a campus of doers. We're a welcoming community of learners. We provide an ethic of care. We serve those who aspire to serve others," he says. The USF mission is summarized in the university's tagline, "Bigger Thinking, Brighter Purpose," reflecting its roots in liberal arts education, while seeking to make a difference in the world. It is one of 24 ACI member colleges and universities.



*President Arvid C. Johnson
(University of St. Francis photo)*

Academically, the university is known for excellence in undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. Nearly 100 percent of students in the Leach College of Nursing pass state licensure exams. It is also known for producing teachers through undergraduate and graduate programs in the College of Education, with nearly 100 percent pass rates on teacher certification exams. It has produced leaders in business, with more than 300 of the university's alumni serving as presidents or CEOs of companies and organizations. The university, Johnson argues, touches peoples' lives in a variety of ways, Johnson says.

USF growing, changing as it approaches 100 years
Founded in 1920, the University of St. Francis is housed on four campuses – three in Joliet and one in Albuquerque, N.M., which is dedicated to instruction in health care and graduate-level business. The university offers 44 undergraduates majors, 17 masters-level programs, two

doctoral programs, and many online courses to students in the U.S. and internationally. The study body totals nearly 4,200, including students from 21 countries. In recent years, USF has experienced growth in students seeking certifications in specific disciplines and in post-graduate programs, Johnson says. More than 48,000 people are alumni of USF.

Before he came to the academic world full-time in 2001, Johnson worked in the defense industry. "For most of my career, I designed electronics for military applications, generally microwave electronics for aircraft," he says. "It was very rewarding for me professionally and personally. But I've always been called to teach." Johnson began his academic career teaching management at Dominican University, an ACI-affiliated university in River Forest, later becoming dean of Dominican's Brennan School of Business. Johnson has a bachelor's degree in physics (from Lewis University, another ACI-affiliated institution), a master's degree in electrical engineering and a Master of Business Administration. He earned a doctorate in management science from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. In 2013, he became USF's ninth president.



The USF student body totals about 4,200. More than 60 percent of freshmen students entering the university this year are first-generation college students.

Johnson's business background is a big help to him as university president. At USF, he brought experience in financial management, marketing, strategic planning and storytelling. "One of the things I'm most proud of is that we've come together on a common vision for what we want to achieve," he said of USF's strategic plan through 2019. In 2020, the university will celebrate its 100th anniversary, with eyes on its second 100 years, Johnson says.



The Motherhouse at USF houses administrative offices, academic departments and is the university's welcome center.

High academic ratings, strategic investments contribute to solid USF reputation

Several college rankings have given USF high marks for academic quality, affordability, financial aid, and value. Many are now looking at return on investment (ROI) as a key part of their criteria, Johnson says. He points out that USF's student outcomes are outstanding, showing that 95 percent of graduates get jobs within six months of graduation, the majority in their major field of study.

"The shift by ratings agencies towards outcomes and ROI has been very good for us, and I would argue very good for ACI institutions in general, because the ACI institutions are generally providing a good return on their students' investments," he says.

In recent years, the university has made a series of "strategic investments" to improve facilities, Johnson says. Examples include a \$10 million renovation on the nursing building at USF's St. Clare campus and a \$3 million renovation for the Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise Center at the university's St. Bonaventure campus. On Feb. 8, 2018, USF will dedicate the LaVerne & Dorothy Brown Science Hall, the university's first new building in more than 30 years. The state-of-the-art facility will house nine teaching labs and three student research labs. "We've clustered on each one of the floors a series of related scientific disciplines to allow interdisciplinary research," Johnson says. "In a small way, that's calling us to our Catholic tradition, because we talk about integration of knowledge." The university's master plan includes future building projects to house the College of Business and Health Administration and additional dorm space, the president says.

USF creates ambassadors to help tell the story

The University of St. Francis has become more intentional about telling its story, and it's a role that Johnson thoroughly enjoys. Four years ago, USF instituted "Ambassador Day," a way to expand a student ambassador program already in place at USF. Like many colleges and universities, student

ambassadors give campus tours to potential students and their families, so why not help others do the same thing for USF? Students, faculty, staff, trustees, elected officials, community business leaders and others participate in Ambassador Day, Johnson says. "Each year we invite the community on to the campus to learn about what we're doing," he says, citing recent examples such as a new business incubator and a new digital recording arts major at USF. "They learn about us and then go out to tell our story as well. Quite honestly, the local community has been supporting USF in powerful ways for years. This is also my way of saying thank you."



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The university has enjoyed other recent successes and contributed to the greater good. For example, it landed a \$289,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant to provide educational programs to prevent violence against women. USF conducts the program in collaboration with Guardian Angel Community Services and the Joliet Police Department. Two alums recently

endowed a unique scholarship in memory of a longtime USF Athletics Department employee who made them and other students feel welcome. And, it joined 161 leaders in the U.S. Catholic community in a November letter to President Trump and Congress asking them to support a global effort to address climate change.

USF typically has a significant number of first-generation students in its freshmen classes. This year, about 64 percent of the freshmen enrolled at USF are the first in their families to attend college. The university provides financial aid and has programs to help these students succeed, Johnson says. "This is where ACI helps," he says. "ACI has looked at not only making college affordable, but it also helps ensure completion." In fact, the university invests heavily in financial aid. In 2016-2017, it invested \$19.4 million in undergraduate student scholarships, and awarded need-based financial aid to 96 percent of full-time undergraduate students. Tuition costs and loan default rates are lower than peer averages, according to the university.

USF was strong when he arrived in 2013 and is getting stronger, Johnson says. "We've got incredible students. We're transforming students into servant leaders. The best thing is that I get to work with people I really care about, for people for whom I deeply care – our students – and with a purpose. It's about making a difference in the world. I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else."