

The Inauguration of Nora Demleitner and a Celebration of St. John's College
President Nora Demleitner's Inaugural Address
Delivered Saturday, March 25, 2023

Good afternoon.

I'd like to start by thanking the St. John's polity for your generosity in welcoming me into this distinctive community.

I need to thank the Board of Visitors and Governors and all of today's speakers for their support.

And I also want to thank the Annapolis community and the state of Maryland for their warm embrace.

What unites *us all* is our student body.

St. John's students are thoughtful in their questions and candid in their perspective on challenges and opportunities:

Smart, probing, thoughtful, skeptical—a tad absent-minded and a bit quirky—but also funny and incredibly personable.

You'll never tire of the conversation or run out of questions if you find yourself in the company of a Johnnie.

There is a secret formula to this place—not everyone is a fit here, but everyone who *is* here, fits.

Somehow, we have all managed to find our way here, to each other, on this Saturday afternoon.

It feels meant-to-be, at least for me. Let me tell you why:

For much of my career, St. John's College and I seem to have been stalking each other – fortunately in a perfectly legal and harmless way.

It started in the early 90s when I worked with St. John's alumnus, Pedro Martinez-Fraga, who thrived in the world of international law, perhaps because the field's themes and values reach back to Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero.

He also seemed to generally question everything I said.

I should have known he was a Johnnie.

Eventually, I learned to pick them out of a crowd. One of my law students, also a Johnnie, always wanted to get to whether justice could be determined at all, even when I asked merely for an interpretation of the language of a rule.

She may have been the only student who even read the rule.

And I must say, Johnnies are classy, even when disagreeing.

They have mastered the art of making strong counterpoints without being confrontational.

And before you notice, they've changed your view, or at least refined it—provided more nuance.

So I've been with Johnnies—and their questions—long before coming here.

But with all these *chance* encounters in mind, let's turn to the *intentional* questions that got us here.

Two years ago, when the Board of Visitors and Governors asked me to be the next President of St. John's College, I honored their question with serious thought and discussion—two mainstays of the institution.

Every one of us has had to answer life-changing questions over the years.

We can all relate to that.

For many of our students, their college choice may have been that major question.

Each of us knows the feeling of anticipation that hangs over an important decision that must be made.

Maybe you've felt confidence in your intended choice,

Or perhaps trepidation over what unknowns may unfold as a result.

Sometimes it is both.

Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan must have felt that same mix of hope and uneasiness when they charted a new path for St. John's nearly 100 years ago.

Their path to an education in the liberal arts, which included math and science, was through a radical pedagogy embedded in a new and non-elective curriculum that centered around a selection of great books.

We often invoke Barr and Buchanan and the impact their decision has had on the college.

But their story, *our* story, is also one of broader context.

In the 1930s, our country was deep in the throes of the Great Depression.

One fourth of the workers in Maryland's cities were unemployed.

Bank failures had wiped out the life savings of millions of Americans.

Fascism and Naziism had taken root in Europe, Asia was rife with conflict, and global war was on the horizon.

When Barr and Buchanan arrived in segregated Annapolis, just two hundred forty-nine young men were enrolled at St. John's College.

And the institution they had been asked to lead had lost its accreditation and much of its money.

Amidst worldwide uncertainty, Barr and Buchanan believed in the power of liberal education and the value of books in shaping learning and independent thought.

Demographic trends favored them.

- The number of high school graduates was increasing year over year;
- Federal government support was growing;
- And there was a tremendous appetite for intellectually stimulating coursework.

Informed by these trends, Barr and Buchanan doubled down on an all-required, interdisciplinary curriculum, which stood in contrast to the elective system that was coming in vogue.

Then termed a "new" program of instruction, it created an approach that set us apart from other institutions of higher education,

It brought the college back from the brink of financial failure,

And it has earned it national recognition and support.

Holding Barr's position as president now, I feel certain he and Buchanan recognized the gravity of their daring choice, and the potential for failure, but also the possibilities it offered to *impact* the lives of young people.

Our pedagogy, our interdisciplinarity, and our promise of an "education for all" remain at the heart of the college.

The content of the program has never been stagnant, and it will continue to change, just as the *participants* have over time.

In 1938, Jacob Klein was the first of several Jewish refugees from Europe to join the faculty.

In 1948, St. John's admitted our first African American student, Martin Dyer, becoming one of the first private colleges south of the Mason-Dixon line to integrate.

Shortly thereafter, the college admitted women as students and appointed them as faculty members.

In 1967, we launched the Summer Institute for teachers, which aimed to reach public school teachers, particularly from urban areas, laying the foundation for the master's curriculum.

And for decades, the college has admitted international students, so that today we have students from six continents enrolled—only Antarctica seems beyond our reach.

Neither time, nor geography, nor culture lessens the impact of this kind of education,

Nor the relevant history that led us to where we are today,

Nor the skill set of respectfully questioning everything - including, perhaps most importantly—ourselves,

Especially when we are the most certain of our path and of our righteousness.

And yet, *if* we spend all of our time looking backward through the long halls of history, we risk not seeing the world as it is today; not thinking about how we effectively respond to it.

We must not fall into this trap.

Instead, we must pursue our mission and be as responsive to the needs and demands of our time as Barr, Buchanan, and their successors were to the needs of their own.

I now carry the responsibility of charting the course into an unknown and unknowable future, one that will hold pitfalls and challenges, but also opportunities.

Our times and circumstances will force us to confront—again—difficult questions:

Will we have the courage to engage more actively with the world, as our predecessors did?

Will we live up to our ideals and provide a platform for engagement in some of the major debates of our day?

Like you, I worry about how difficult it's become to *talk to one another*, and how hardened our politics have become, both here and abroad.

And many of us wonder, too, if the scale and speed of new technologies like AI might outrun the liberating forces of democracy we wish to endure and thrive.

Remember though—

We owe the spread of democratic ideas and the accessibility of the great books in our very curriculum to a technological innovation that sparked monumental controversy in the fifteenth century—the *printing press*.

So, these are not new challenges.

Still, just as it must have been in 1937 when the new Program was founded, it can be hard to find hope amidst the trends of *our time*.

It is easy to wonder if we—as humans—will find our humanity again.

I believe that the search starts with two things:

A dedication to *having real conversations*;

And a commitment to the institutions that fortify society.

They are part of why I chose to be at St. John's College.

We need institutions like this one that feed the best in us; help us see the best in each other and in our history; unite us in a common purpose; and help us talk, learn, and grow together.

Now, good institutions also see clearly, and learn from, their own failings.

St. John's College has not always been the most involved neighbor.

In fact, there are times in our history we've been downright exclusionary to members of the local community.

But we are taking steps to change that—

This inauguration is one of many instances of that change:

Rather than solely including internal audiences as we've done in times past, we reached *out* to welcome *all of you* here to experience St. John's College.

And we will continue to do so:

- *As we develop* deeper, broader, and more authentic ties to the institutions, leaders, lawmakers, and higher education partners, whose well-being is inextricably tied to our own.
- *As we confront* the more troubling sides of history that have unfolded on the land we now occupy.
- *And as we reimagine* aspects of ourselves.

Last month, for example, we welcomed the Annapolis community to our campus's revived Mitchell Art Museum.

Here, we challenge all who enter to consider the human experience, and to let extraordinary art and artists inspire persistent and timely questions.

In the museum's first exhibition, called *The Open Museum*, we've invited visitors to write and draw directly on the walls.

The still-evolving display unites a variety of unique perspectives cultivated, not just around the Johnnie table, but across our region.

Married with a deep respect for our history, the power of our collective experiences—

- From the ones represented in the museum exhibition
- To those we heard in some of today's earlier remarks—

Enables us to meet contemporary challenges:

- How will we use our educational model to more effectively help students find a purposeful life and purposeful work?
- How will we offer broader access to students from diverse backgrounds, who will add to the special chemistry of the St. John's College experience?

- And how will we ensure they succeed here?

And of course, as a Johnnie would ask, what does success even *mean*?

As we reach new inflection points, *I* believe we are well positioned to face these and other challenges.

We have the brain power, the practiced skill of questioning, and the tools to have hard conversations and react to meet the moment;

And to push boundaries that sustain and evolve our distinctive pursuit of service to our students, our country.

In the past year, we've already begun to make some meaningful advancements—improving accessibility and augmenting quality of life for our campus community.

We celebrated the opening of our new and expanded Student Health and Wellness Center, which is intentionally located in the middle of campus.

Student well-being is both the prerequisite and the consequence of learning.

So naturally, expanding student support and ensuring they feel safe and ready to learn is a major priority for me, and for the college.

It is my vision that St. John's College sustains its unique spirit and continues to set itself apart from other institutions of higher education—

And that we keep leaning into our distinctive curriculum while responding to the needs of our time, remaining relevant for the next 100 years and beyond.

We must champion an atmosphere where students have a strong sense of Belonging, and they are set up for success as participants in civic life and the workforce;

An environment where we are engendering responsible citizenship and lifelong learning, while responding thoughtfully and ethically to the demands of the marketplace;

A wellspring of Diversity embraced by and encouraged in our student body, staff, faculty and program of study;

And a place where Affordability for our students is always front of mind.

We've created great momentum with the tuition reset, and the continued generosity of our alumni, friends, and the state of Maryland.

Our philanthropic model must be tended to regularly, to ensure our financial security and to continue allowing students from all walks of life to experience our world-class education.

As the leader of this institution, I am privileged to be surrounded by supporters who represent a diverse background of experience: our board, faculty, staff, student body, and alumni – each well-versed in addressing challenges present and predicted.

My thanks, again, to all of you.

Now, there are a few people I want to call out, who are very special to me.

The first male presidential spouse, my husband Michael Smith.

He is charting his own course in his new role.

And I couldn't wish for better counsel.

As a practicing lawyer, he is accustomed to reading lengthy writings some may consider unintelligible, which sounds like an essential trait for a St. John's College presidential spouse.

After more than 25 years of marriage, he still surprises me.

Without St John's, I wouldn't have learned of his apparent secret crush on Galileo.

Michael is a wonderful father to our children, Venetia and Cordell, who have shaped my life over the last twenty years.

They've taught me a lot, from texting to funky resume formats;

From living with a dog and a cat to traveling with less luggage.

In short, they have made me a better parent, and a better person.

I want to thank my brother-in-law Nader, who travelled here all the way from Honolulu, and say "hello" to my sister Ada who is home sick and watching us on the livestream.

My parents are no longer with us, but I know they would be very proud

And I'm delighted to see so many of my friends here today.

I am also deeply touched by the contributions of those who took part in today's ceremony.

Your gracious words and performances filled me with a sense of purpose and gratitude for the spirit of this institution and your confidence in me is humbling.

I feel both honored and at home.

At St. John's College we start with a question but it's time now to end with an exclamation mark.

Thank you!