

KNOW THYSELF

A Presidential Conversation

with the
President of
the College



ST JOHN'S
College

What is the state of St. John’s College in 2024? This “report,” done in characteristically contrarian St. John’s style, is really a conversation and attempts to answer that question with honesty and complexity.

To do so, one must first look back to the year 2016, when the college faced an existential financial crisis. President Roosevelt had just been appointed to the collegewide presidency and together with the Board of Visitors and Governors, the college launched the \$300 million *Freeing Minds* campaign alongside a significant reduction in tuition. Now, eight years later, **President Roosevelt will soon retire and **President Demleitner** will assume the collegewide presidency. To help the college community understand the last eight years, the two presidents sat down in conversation to discuss how the college has changed during this time, how it has remained the same, what challenges and opportunities lie ahead—and how the college’s alumni, donors, and friends can contribute to the continuing vitality of St. John’s.**

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NORA DEMLEITNER: Mark, when you began your presidency in 2016, the college was in financial turmoil. One of the first publications I read when I came to St. John's was the 2017 report on the state of the college. When I compare the St. John's of then to the St. John's of today, I'm struck by how much is different and how much remains the same. Tuition is significantly lower, not higher, which is an almost unbelievable feat. There is a stronger support system for students overall, better career development, and more resources for student health and well-being. These changes surround and strengthen our beautiful center of gravity, the Program, which is very much the same.

MARK ROOSEVELT: There is no question that what is constant is the academic Program. There have been small changes, and there always should be small changes, but anybody from the college's past could come to campus today and recognize the college, recognize our Program, immediately. That's a truth about St. John's that I want to emphasize. The college's heart is still in the classroom.

Externally, we've made progress on a variety of fronts, and to do that we had to acknowledge the changes that have been happening in higher education, how they impact all colleges except for the richest, and certainly how they impact us. The reason we got into the financial trouble you mentioned is that we misunderstood those changes. We thought the 2008 recession was a temporary anomaly. What we were experiencing was actually a sea change in financial conditions for colleges and universities. Simply put, students cannot pay as much as earlier generations. This means we get about \$10 million less from students than we did in the early 2000s.

With inflation that would be closer to \$14 or \$15 million, and when you have a \$50 million operating budget, which is essentially what we spend to run the college, the loss of so much student-derived revenue is extraordinarily challenging. Once we came to terms with that, we were able to accept what we had to do about it. I take great pride in how the community responded. It meant cuts in staff and compensation. It meant we had to hold steady for a

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few years with the number of faculty we had, because we could not afford to replace those who retired. It was difficult and painful, but there was widespread acceptance that all these things had to be done to protect the college, so we could get our feet back on the ground and move from a structural deficit to a balanced budget—which is still precarious, very precarious. In fact, unfortunately, we are moving back toward deficits.

At the same time, we had to confront the fact that we had at least \$150 million in deferred maintenance that needed to be addressed and not enough supports in place for student success. I am very proud of the progress we have made in both areas. We've been able to renovate three of our largest buildings, and we have secured financing for a fourth. Our students also have far more robust support along the continuum, from the time they apply to when they graduate—and even after in terms of career support.

ND: We know that the number of high school students is expected to decline rather precipitously in many parts of the United States, beginning in 2026. In your view, how prepared is St. John's for what is likely to be a protracted period of very intense competition among colleges?

MR: I want to emphasize something important: we have a tremendous advantage in knowing who we are and believing in who we are.

Recruiting our students will be more difficult now, with fewer young people going to college, but our audience has always been a small one. Finding the right students has always been a challenge. But we know who we are, and we know we are different from every other college.

You have heard me say in my convocation speech that we are as different from Oberlin, Pomona, and Middlebury as they are from Ohio State. I believe that, and I think our differences are important. We ask students to work outside their comfort zone, to do advanced work in math, science, literature, and philosophy. Nobody else does that. We ask our faculty to teach across the curriculum. God knows

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nobody else does that. I think our position is clear, and I think our differences are clear.

Now does that mean we aren't taking proactive steps to safeguard the college? No. We are much better prepared for a competitive environment than we were in 2016. For one thing, we are spending less time on recruitment strategies that don't bring students to the college and focusing on those that do. For example, our most reliable pipeline is Summer Academy, our immersive program for high school students, so we expanded its capacity and saw record participation this year. On the other hand, the *U.S. News & World Report* and all the other spurious ratings systems don't bring students to St. John's. It's a priority for other colleges to boost their ratings. It isn't for us.

ND: We must also acknowledge the public drumbeat against higher education itself. We are starting to see it in job ads, with employers—and billionaires—telling prospective students they don't need a degree, just skills and expertise. The low unemployment rate and higher minimum wage and starting salaries also make it easier, and tempting, for people to forego college and go straight into the labor market.

Add to that the challenge of people thinking the liberal arts won't get them, career-wise, where they want to be. There is a perception that a liberal education is very impractical and doesn't bring the immediate financial returns people expect after four years in college. Now we know this isn't true mid- and long-term because we know our alumni, and we see the impact they have and their accomplishments, but that misperception persists.

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MR: There are going to be times of disquiet and change, times of questioning the value of higher education, and we are living in one of those times. But let me say this: I am convinced the pendulum—the thinking about the liberal arts and the desire for civil conversation—will swing back in our direction, not that St. John's would change even if it didn't. I firmly believe that people, or at least a sizeable

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subset of people, are going to rebel against the commodification of education.

ND: There is a stirring for civil conversation. Stringfellow Barr made that observation back in 1968 in his *Notes on Dialogue*. He was bemoaning the absence of serious and deep conversation in the media when he wrote that “a lonely crowd hungers for dialogue.”

MR: He was right, and I think the days ahead will prove that once again. In the meantime, we aren’t going to waver. We aren’t going to change based on the sentiments of a given moment in time. We believe that the liberal arts are very much of value, as they always were and ever will be.

I believe people will always want to find meaning in their lives, to find meaning in the world, to ask the big questions, to ask what the heck we are doing here and how we can understand ourselves as best as possible. Those conversations are what St. John’s is about, so we have, and this bears repeating, a huge advantage in knowing who we are, loving who we are, respecting and believing in who we are. When you believe in who you are and have alumni who support you, the shifting tides of public opinion on the liberal arts matter less. They matter a lot less.

ND: I would double down on this. We need to step into our leadership as a college that offers a truly liberal education.

Most people have a very inchoate and often incoherent sense of what the liberal arts and sciences are. It’s not about leading people into believing something or drawing certain conclusions but making it possible for them to draw conclusions for themselves through deep thinking and conversation. Our alumni chose *Freeing Minds* as the name of our fundraising campaign because that is what we are doing, we are creating independent minds.

What is especially relevant about Barr’s comment is that when he talks about genuine dialogue, he envisions this college as the place where it can be found. That is exactly what I see on this campus today, and it is remarkable. At a time that’s domestically and internationally

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fraught, our students have civil conversations about consequential issues. Those conversations aren't always perfect, emotions sometimes get the better of students—and the rest of us—but there's no screaming, there's no sloganeering. There is thoughtful conversation. That is not what we're seeing in corners of higher education and other parts of society.

MR: It certainly isn't what comes across the airwaves. And you're right, it isn't what we are seeing on some college campuses.

ND: That means how we educate students is profoundly transformative. Our discussion-based seminars force people to think deeply and critically, to form their opinions in a collaborative way, and to disagree without being disagreeable. Their opinions might be about Plato, or about the values of justice and rationality, or they might be about the broader societal and economic issues of the day.

I learned this early on, at the end of my second month at the college, when Russia invaded Ukraine, and I received a heartbreaking email from a student who had begun to tie seminar readings and conversations to a world event that impacted him directly. Suddenly the questions posed by the texts became very personal: What is worth dying for? When, if ever, should your belief in nationhood, in democracy, be more important than your own life? The readings and the conversations anchored his insights into those questions and provided the tools to think them through. Hearing all of that was incredibly moving for me and a stark demonstration of the power of our education.

It was also a reminder of this education's fundamental purpose. More people should be aware that Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan conceived of this curriculum and way of teaching as a bulwark against fascism, which was on the rise globally in 1937. They visualized St. John's as offering the kind of education that would lay the foundation for participation in a free and democratic society—and it does. It produces citizens who have thoughtfully formed their values and their positions, and when they are called



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upon by society to make decisions, they can do so in an educated manner. I want more people to hear this message because it is crucial. For democracy to work, we need an educated citizenry, and no college offers a better education than St. John's.

MR: We help people begin the process of developing a personal philosophy, a way of looking at the world that reduces the risk of reckless opinions. I hear that from students. They tell me they've begun to make some sense of the world and their place in the world. I view this as something essential that the college does for students.

ND: What is also essential, and very beautiful, is that this is not an elite education. It is an education for all.

MR: I would take offense if I heard someone describe St. John's as elite. I think that's an insult masquerading as a compliment. St. John's is such a different place, and we have a different understanding of what it means to be elite and what it means to be prestigious, and we are not very interested in the common understanding of those terms.

Most other schools of our quality wouldn't take some of the students we accept, students who have struggled in high school, who didn't feel at home in high school or didn't feel challenged. We take students who are searching for something very different than the traditional approach to learning.

And when we accept students other institutions deem "risky," we frequently find they are excellent citizens of the college. They found their home. They found their tribe. They found a place that honors who they are and what they want from their education.

I would never want to turn away those students. I don't even understand the world some institutions live in where they proudly reject 96 percent of their applicants. I don't understand that type of elitism, that arrogance, and I am proud that St. John's is not like that.

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ND: It is still incredible to me that we have students who come to us from other schools and are willing to start over, to begin again as freshmen, despite the social and financial costs. Imagine giving up a year of tuition, maybe more, when you get no advanced standing for doing so. That says a lot to me about the kind of education St. John's offers and the kind of students who choose it. They want to be challenged. They want to work hard, both individually and together, and we know they will because our academic strength is unsurpassed. They want to be engaged, so they come to St. John's and often find they don't want to leave the classroom or the conversation. I am mesmerized by that because it just doesn't happen anywhere else.

MR: It all goes back to knowing and appreciating who we are and what makes us different.

Like I said before, I think the pendulum will swing back in our direction, and I think, or at least I hope, that there will be a redefining of terms like "prestigious" and "elite." Now I will admit that the college succumbed for far too long to prestige pricing, which is an unjustifiably high tuition price meant to signal worth. Our tuition doesn't convey our worth, so we rejected that concept, and I'm very grateful that our community gave us the means to do that through their extraordinary philanthropy. We've had to raise tuition a little since the pandemic because of the related inflation, but as you pointed out, it is still substantially lower today than it was a decade ago.

ND: I think the college's rejection of prestige pricing reveals just how seriously we take the idea of an education for all.

When Roosevelt Montás visited St. John's in 2022 to talk about his book, *Rescuing Socrates*, he remarked on how the kind of education we offer can touch anyone of any race, any gender, any income, any background. We have been living that mission over time. It's not something we simply talk about, and it's not something we acted on just once. In the last ten years especially, we have expanded

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access to the college in ways we hadn't been able to do before. We have more international students, more students of color, more students at every step on the socioeconomic ladder. We have more students in the Graduate Institute, taking part in conversations from around the world and across generations.

I want us to be proud of that, but at the same time be mindful of the ongoing impact of economic inequality. It is a deeply entrenched problem, nationally and globally, and despite our incredible tuition cut, we are still expensive to most of our applicants.

“Not only are we facing the ramifications of inequality, but we're also dealing with the fact that families have fewer resources to contribute to college than they used to.”

MR: You raise a good point. Not only are we facing the ramifications of inequality, but we're also dealing with the fact that families have fewer resources to contribute to college than they used to. Something that surprises a lot of people is that our students are less affluent than most. Many people still imagine our curriculum as being more attractive to upper-income students. It simply isn't true. About 95 percent of our students receive financial aid. That's an extraordinary number. More than 20 percent of our students are eligible for Federal Pell Grants. The college is very fortunate to have received a campaign gift from the Jay Pritzker Foundation that allows us to match those grants, dollar for dollar.

Nevertheless, we are still not able to meet full need, and we lose a lot of good students to other colleges because they can get more financial support.

It was crucial that we shift from a financial model that is based on student-derived revenue to one where philanthropy is at the center. We were right to make that change and to launch a campaign that would allow us to do it. Donors have told me, individually, that they gave a heck of a lot more to the campaign than they planned on, and I know that would not be the case if we weren't such a distinctive place and had not taken the bold step to cut our tuition by one-third.

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ND: Now that the campaign is complete, what do you think our alumni need to know about the status of our financial model?

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MR: Alumni need to know that the college requires, and will always require, very significant philanthropy. Is it because the college is spending too much money? Not at all. We have controlled costs very well. If we look at the last ten years, our expenses have gone up an average of 1.3 percent a year, which is far below the rate of inflation. If we look at our revenues, however, we are getting \$10 million less from students. To make up for that, we needed to add at least \$200 million to our endowment. *Freeing Minds* added \$80 million, along with a \$35 million gift that was not counted toward the campaign. This is wonderful and certainly impactful, but it’s just over half of what we need, so we still have a long way to go. We’re going to get there but will likely run deficits until we do.

ND: You probably have an idea of the question I’m about to ask next, don’t you?

MR: I’m guessing it’s this one: How on earth could St. John’s raise \$325 million and still have financial challenges? That’s the question we’re hearing, and it deserves a clear answer.

ND: That’s exactly the question I had in mind.

MR: Let me start by acknowledging that *Freeing Minds* was a huge success. For a college the size of St. John’s to raise \$325 million is remarkable. It really is. Some fine colleges that are much larger and have more alumni than St. John’s have raised less. And that says a lot, a whole lot, about the depth of the love our alumni and friends have for this education.

What people need to understand is that only \$200 million has been received at this point because \$125 million came in as pledged gifts. In other words, we will receive those gifts in the future. Some of it will arrive over the



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next few years, and some of it will come later from estate plans. Not all of it will go into the endowment, but \$82 million will. We also received some commitments outside of the campaign that will raise that figure to \$100 million or more. That gets us closer to where we need to be. It's just going to take time to get there.

ND: Let's talk about the money that has come in the door, because our alumni are curious about where that money has gone. We've added \$80 million to the endowment, and that leaves \$120 million we need to account for, right?

MR: Right.

ND: I'd like to start with the \$50 million that went toward campus improvements, because as we speak I am enjoying our beautifully renovated Mellon Hall, and watching students stream by, absorbed in conversation. Mellon is our main academic building and the social and creative heart of the Annapolis campus. At 70 years of age, it is also relatively young, so you can only imagine the work required to bring our older facilities up to modern standards. A few years ago, we repaired our most historic building, McDowell, and we are almost done renovating our largest residence hall, Edensword Hall, formerly known as Campbell Hall.

MR: Work is now beginning on Santa Fe's largest building, the Pritzker Student Center, which hasn't had any major improvements in six decades. The \$50 million we invested in our campuses might raise some eyebrows, but the reality is that we had, and still have, a lot of deferred maintenance to address. So the college is very fortunate to have supporters who chose to direct their campaign gifts to these improvements—which are by no means plush. I want to stress that. I also want to stress that we have more work to do, and new gifts will be crucial. Thankfully the Jay Pritzker Foundation has given us a vehicle, the Pritzker Challenge, for getting this work done.

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ND: So that's \$50 million. And then there were the deficits.

MR: Exactly. I'd ask people to remember the year 2016, when we realized just how high our deficits were. \$12 million annually. We were staring into what seemed like an abyss. And we began to envision a campaign that would help us steer the ship into calmer waters. So we struck a deal. Our board—and in particular two magnanimous donors, Ron Fielding and Warren Spector—would agree to seed the campaign with their gifts if management pledged to get the deficit to zero by year five. We did it, and it took about \$25 million to get there, with the gifts from Ron and Warren accounting for about half that figure. It might not be a flashy way to spend money, but it was absolutely imperative that we climb out of the hole we were in and assure other donors that their gifts would go to better things.

ND: And here is where the story gets more exciting because the remaining gifts allowed us to do all the things we have been talking about and celebrating over the past eight years, like expanding our student supports.

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MR: Before we launched the campaign, we had extensive conversations with our alumni, and they were very consistent and clear. They wanted us to fix what they saw as an unsupportive environment. They told us that students needed more academic and mental health supports, they needed better career development and pathways to internships and jobs, and they needed to know that they belonged at the college regardless of their gender, race, religion, or economic situations. And so we got to work on those things, building up the scaffolding that would support our very rigorous Program.

ND: About \$25 million came from gifts to the Annual Fund, which feed into our operating budget and benefit every student's financial, emotional, academic, and professional needs. Another \$20 million came from donors who

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earmarked their gifts for specific initiatives that our budget couldn't accommodate.

“We are waiting on \$125 million from pledges and planned gifts. Until that money arrives, there will be years when we run deficits.”

MR: That's right. We could have asked our donors to direct all their gifts to the endowment, which would give us long-term stability, but then we wouldn't have been able to address the support issues that so badly needed addressing. And so instead, we built out the programs we needed like the Pritzker Bridge Program. We built out the Santa Fe Office of Personal and Professional Development, something the Santa Fe campus desperately needed. And we grew our academic and mental health supports. Some of this work was expensive, but luckily we found donors who were willing to get these initiatives off the ground so we could work on growing our endowment and balancing our budget.

And that gets us to where we are today. The campaign is over, we've invested much of the money we received into student support programs, and we invested much of the money into the endowment. We are seeing the impact, which is tremendous—but now we have these programs that we need to continue supporting, and we are waiting on \$125 million from pledges and planned gifts. Until that money arrives, there will be years when we run deficits.

ND: I would add that we hope to see more consistent participation in our Annual Fund. We all have a stake in preserving St. John's in perpetuity, but it is important that we balance the need to grow our endowment with the need to support existing students.

I also want to reiterate what you said about the impact of giving, because it is indeed tremendous, and it is not something you and I can talk about too much. Our alumni and friends need to know that it is their gifts that allow us to fulfill our mission and to live up to who we say we are. By practically every metric we measure, our current freshman class is the most diverse in years, and without consistent giving, the cultural and socioeconomic makeup of the class would look very different.

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MR: I've already mentioned how proud I am of our students, but I'll say it again. They are seekers. They want something different in an education, and they want something different in a college. Fewer and fewer students have the means to afford St. John's, which is why we had to ask for support and why we must continue to ask.

ND: I'd like to shift the conversation at this point, because I don't want to ignore the fact that financial barriers aren't the only ones our students face, and they aren't the only ones we need to address. There are social and cultural barriers, perceived barriers related to career choices, and barriers to completing an application.

I'm going to single out the latter because our discussion-based application, which we launched this year as a supplement to the traditional application, is such a wonderful example of how we are removing barriers in ways that are true to who we are. It is already yielding some very strong applicants who are attracted to a college where the application reflects the ethos of the institution. This new format can also help students avoid the crazy rat race of the college application process, which often tells us very little about what a student can bring to the classroom.

MR: It really is appalling that we have colleges and universities that reject almost everyone who wants to go there and are proud of that, and these same institutions are then held up to the public as being the best. They aren't necessarily the best. I went to one of those universities. I think St. John's is far more rigorous.

ND: As I said earlier, no college offers a better education than St. John's. That is why I would like to see the college gain more self-assurance. We need to step out of the shadows and into the limelight. The college deserves that. The college deserves to take its place in higher education proudly, rightfully, and strongly. We are a gem. Our local Maryland state senator referred to us as "a gem in Annapolis and in Maryland."

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I want there to be more people who have heard of this college as a beacon of American education and a place where civil discourse is not just practiced but lived. I want people to know about all the opportunities that are available to the larger community, including Summer and Winter Classics and of course the Graduate Institute. No longer should we encounter scores of people who begin their sentences with, “If only I had known about St. John’s....” Our alumni, especially, could be—and often are—vocal ambassadors. So many of our students say they came to St. John’s because the best teacher they ever had or the most interesting person they ever met went to St. John’s and was willing to talk about it.

Prospective students aren’t the only ones listening. We are also seeing some top-tier universities take a closer look at what our students can bring to their graduate programs. Over the past few years, we have formed partnerships with some highly regarded—I am not going to use the word elite—institutions that will guarantee our students a tuition discount and, in some cases, offer early admission or other benefits. Among them are Boston University’s School of Public Health, the University of Maryland’s Carey School of Law, and Notre Dame of Maryland University’s School of Education. We are working on some other relationships, and what is notable is that some of these institutions approached us, not the other way around. They asked to be our partners, to help get our students into their graduate programs, because they are starting to hear about St. John’s, and they appreciate what our students offer.

And what our students offer are the things modern society needs most, including the ability to communicate at a time when everyone uses emojis.

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MR: I’m not entirely sure what an emoji is or why anyone would want to use it. It sounds dangerous to me.

ND: Now let’s not get carried away, Mark! I’ll plead guilty to using them. They are a part of what passes for communication in modern society, although that isn’t the communication skill employers ask for. There was a recent study

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in which employers stated that what they miss in new employees is their ability to communicate orally. Now, if there's one thing you learn at St. John's, it's to communicate orally. Collaborating, getting to the core of a problem, leading a group around the seminar table, doing it calmly and rationally, these are the kinds of abilities our society needs and employers want.

We are producing future-proof alumni, and that is particularly important when we are increasingly impacted by the growth of artificial intelligence.

“I really believe that when you’ve got a situation where the world has gone so far in the wrong direction, there must be people and institutions that question what passes for ‘progress.’”

MR: I’m not sure how I feel about artificial intelligence, but I am convinced that people should question it, along with the rest of modern technology-driven culture, more deeply.

I was looking at *Zero at the Bone: 50 Entries Against Despair* by the poet and Yale professor Christian Wiman, who is a fascinating character to me. He says, “One grows so tired in American public life of the certitudes and platitudes, the megaphone mouths and stadium praise, influencers and effluencers and the whole tsunami of slop that comes pouring into our lives like toxic sludge.”

I really believe that when you’ve got a situation where the world has gone so far in the wrong direction, there must be people and institutions that question what passes for “progress.” You’ve tapped into it with AI and this amazing burst of technology that will have so many negatives and, yes, some positives as well. Somebody needs to ask why we are going in that direction, is it right to go in that direction, and do I want my life to go in that direction?

Among the many things I love about this college is that so many people are willing to ask those questions. I think we have more people on our faculty here in Santa Fe who don’t own cell phones than any other institution I know of, except perhaps a rabbinical college. It’s more complicated for our students because the sway and the pull and the demands of modern culture are astronomical and resisting them is difficult. If we help them think through that, they can make choices about what they want to participate

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in and what they do not want to participate in, and that is of enormous value.

ND: I think we share some of the same visceral reactions and anxieties. Maybe there's a slightly different way to look at it though, and that's to recognize that the kind of education we offer, one that helps students to clarify their own values, is the best preparation for creating a meaningful life in the modern world.

MR: I very much believe that St. John's helps students make choices that are consistent with their own values and not the values imposed on them by others.

I would even go one step further and say that we help students resist trends, resist mainstream notions of progress, resist mainstream notions of what it means to build a "successful" life. That's very difficult to do, and I think our students are better able to do it than most.

ND: Can I point out a word choice you made? You said, "resist" trends. I would say that we help students to "question" trends. They should be critically examined like everything else, and the ability to do that is what makes this education ideally suited for modern times. It is why, and people outside of St. John's would probably be quite surprised to hear this, we have a lot of alumni who have gone into emerging industries, including the tech field, and excel at many different levels.

Regardless of how you and I feel about the rise of AI, this generation will have to ask what it means to be human, what it means to think or create or imagine. I am comforted by the fact that it will be our students and alumni who shape those answers, and they will do it thoughtfully, with all the tools the college has given them. That will be good for all of us.

MR: I do think a major mistake we have made as a species is thinking that what is good for us is good for the world.

ND: You don't think that's true?

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MR: No, it isn't true. We need to reverse that paradigm. Do you think it's true?

ND: Not when considering how great we are at damaging the planet. I think this is the kind of question, the kind of humbling question, that more people need to ask. And St. John's is the right college in which to ask it.

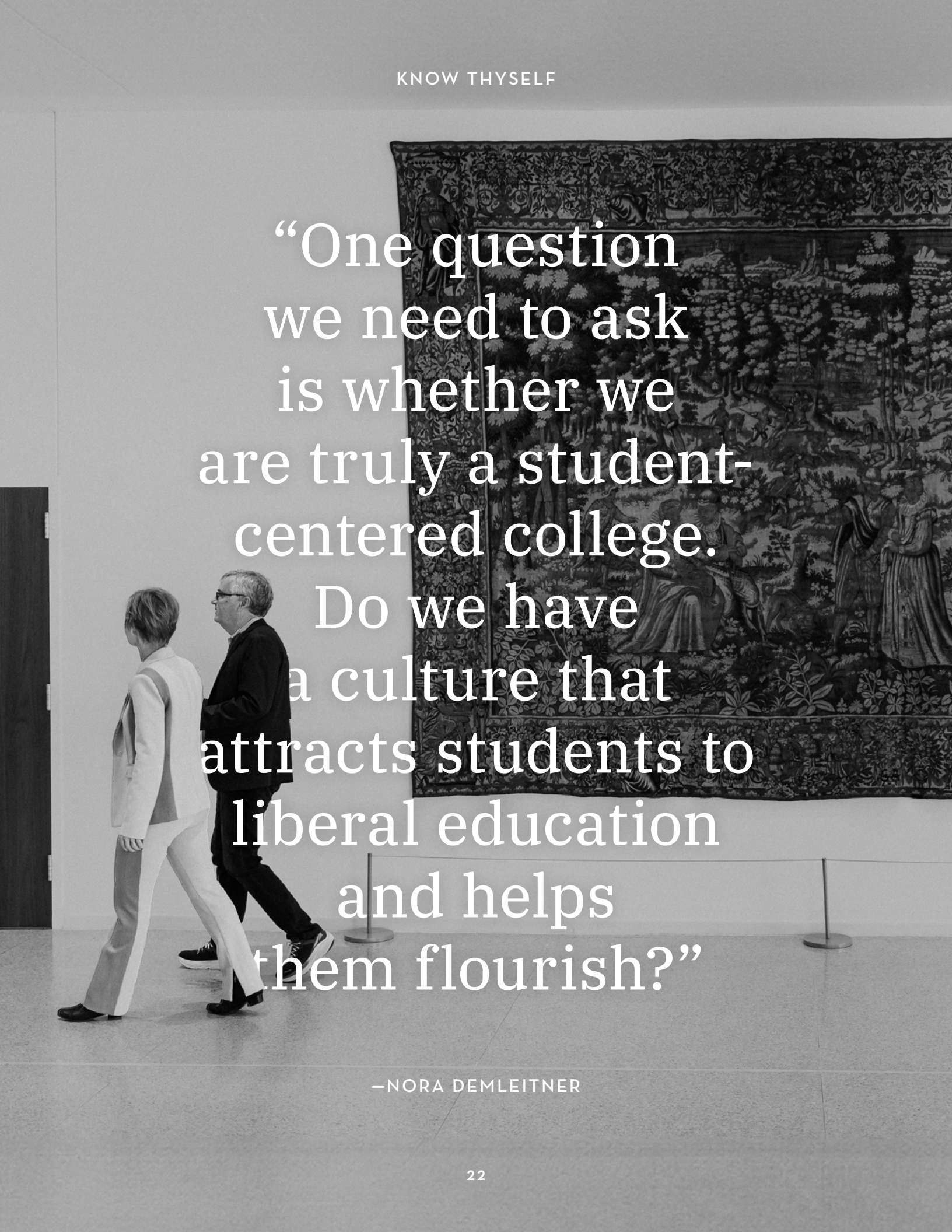
MR: I'm glad you raised the topic of humility. If we're going to solve the problems we face, I'm convinced we need a fundamental shift in human psychology from arrogance and hubris to humility.

My years at St. John's have helped me reflect very differently on education and its purpose. And it has made me value what I think a liberal arts education is supposed to inculcate, differently. I deeply believe that the major outcome of a liberal arts education should be humility.

We know we can have glimmers of understanding. We also know that what we *don't* know dwarfs what we do know. We don't know why we're on this planet. We don't know what our lives were intended to be or what our species is intended to be. One of the best things St. John's does for students is help them understand how important it is to increase our knowledge, and how limited it is even at its peak.

ND: I agree with you completely, but I'm going to throw open a door at this point because I think that's true for St. John's as well. As a college, we need to accept the limits of our own understanding and continue asking questions about who we are and how we can stay true to who we are. In some respects, it's a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is to do exactly what we intend to do, and that is to stay on the path we have been on for 90 years, the path that produces independent, rational thinkers. But staying true to who we are can also mean strengthening some other areas that are important.

MR: What would be some examples?



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ND: Well, one question we need to ask is whether we are truly a student-centered college. Do we have a culture that attracts students to liberal education and helps them flourish at the college and beyond?

MR: How would you answer that?

ND: I would say that we aren't at the point where we can answer those questions with a flat out "yes."

For starters, we need to make sure that our campuses and our classrooms are places that our students feel comfortable calling home for four years, places they want to return to as alumni. Our students want to be challenged academically, but they also want to be in a place that accepts who they are and the backgrounds they bring with them.

I think we can take heart in how well we already do in this respect. When our students dress differently or wear their hair differently than what fashion dictates, nobody turns around, nobody points fingers, and that is empowering. But the college cannot be complacent. A diverse student body in a small community can leave some students feeling excluded. Like you said, we have students who tell us they found their tribe here. It's going to take an ongoing effort to ensure this remains the case, regardless of one's background.

We also need to get students thinking about how a meaningful life can include meaningful work and explain how the college can help them prepare to make that a reality. I mentioned earlier that students face barriers to enrollment that go beyond the financial and this is one of them. Some of our students have a clear idea of what they want to do for a career and will look to other colleges if they don't think St. John's will give them a practical start. My hope, my plan, is that we can open more doors to specific careers and increase the information we provide to students about the opportunities they have while they are here. They need to know, for example, that we can guarantee them at least one paid internship, and we will help

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them pay for at least some of the prerequisite courses they might need for graduate or professional school.

Now we all understand that many of those students are going to completely change their minds, and that is okay. That is the beauty of this education. It encourages you to experiment with life and with ways of living. Because we are encouraging students to examine themselves so deeply, some will inevitably make career choices they would not have made at a college where they would have been asked to specialize early.

I do want to acknowledge that these are areas where the college has really turned things around over the past few years, but we need to keep asking where we can improve.

MR: Thanks. I think we have made a great deal of progress. And the college has gotten better at asking our alumni for input.

ND: Our alumni know full well what ails the college. We still see that today. There might be slight variations on certain positions, but as a core, our alumni have firm opinions on what needs to change and what doesn't.

MR: And this isn't new work. It's work we have been doing for the past eight years.

ND: Right. The Pritzker Bridge Program is a good example. We've long known that the college loses more students in their freshman year than at any other time, so we launched a program to help incoming students adapt better to the rigors of the college. Now the percentage of freshmen who return as sophomores is trending higher.

Health and wellness would be another example—and this goes back to our earlier discussion of trends and how to thoughtfully assess them. We did not have particularly good wellness or mental health offerings in place before 2016, and by that point we already knew that ever more young people were struggling with mental health issues.

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This was not a passing fad but a societal problem. The college needed to make changes and did.

Thoughtful improvements are a necessary part of ensuring that the Program is not just preserved but kept strong.

MR: This conversation raises a serious issue, because we cannot be a student-centered college, and we certainly cannot be a strong college, without tutors. Alumni probably don't realize this, but right now the starting salary for faculty at St. John's is only \$58,000. Think about that for a moment. That is lower than almost all the liberal arts colleges we like to consider our peers.

ND: And that isn't a reasonable salary for anyone who hopes to live in Annapolis or Santa Fe, which are very expensive cities.

MR: It really isn't, and it's terribly unfair to ask our faculty and staff to buy into what we do at St. John's, to believe in and love what we do, and then have them make unreasonable sacrifices to work here.

ND: But we do have a plan.

MR: We do. Some board members and other generous folks were kind enough to tell me they wanted to do something to honor my retirement, and together we realized that if we didn't use this opportunity to create a fund for salary increases, then there probably wouldn't be any. This fund will allow St. John's to increase our starting faculty salaries to \$70,000 this year and to increase all salaries by about 2.5 percent every year for six years thereafter for a total increase of 18 percent, without adding to our operating budget, which is running a deficit again.

ND: I believe we have about \$8 million raised so far, correct?

MR: That's right, and we're aiming for \$10 million. Remember this is what is called an "expiring" fund, so all

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the money in it will be expended. Our belief is that by the time the fund is depleted in seven years, our operating budget will be able to absorb these raises. Why do we think that? Because we have over \$100 million in gifts coming to the endowment and we have a community of supporters who have shown a willingness to use their philanthropy to get things done. It just needs to continue. We've been successful, but we can't declare victory. Very few colleges can, except the wealthiest. And St. John's is not a wealthy college, although we are by no means a poor one either.

ND: What we are is a grateful college.

MR: Well said. Deeply grateful. We've asked people to do a lot of hard things during my time here. And I'm just amazed at how they have responded. I'm amazed at the goodwill of the faculty and staff toward reductions we had to make and the generosity of donors who have made it a priority to care for the college they love. It's been a real community effort.

ND: This would be the right time to mention your retirement portrait, which I understand is... different.

"I'm amazed at the goodwill of the faculty and staff toward reductions we had to make and the generosity of donors who have made it a priority to care for the college they love. It's been a real community effort."

MR: It is, and I couldn't be happier with it. Anyone who has ever been to our campuses has probably seen the portraits of our longer-serving past presidents in McDowell Hall in Annapolis and in the Weigle Hall stairwell in Santa Fe. When I was asked how I wanted my portrait done, I knew that I did not want to go the oil painting route. What I got was a group photograph of me amongst many of my colleagues, taken on the grassy knoll here in Santa Fe with a drone. Everyone in the picture has contributed to putting this college on stronger footing. Of course there are also a lot of people, a lot, who should be in that photo and aren't. That includes faculty and staff who could not make it, and our alumni, friends, and donors who give, who continue to give, to ensure that we can offer this transformative education to many future generations.

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ND: If you had to give the college one parting message as you head into retirement, what would it be?


MR: Well retirement is just a form of commencement, isn't it? I don't think I could do any better than to repeat the best commencement advice I have ever heard. It came from tutor Eva Brann, who retired from St. John's this year after a remarkable 66-year career with the college.

Her advice? Find a place you love and make it better.

Looking back on my time here, I have grown to love this place very much. And all I can hope is that during my eight and a half years here, I made it a stronger and more supportive place. I love the ethos of this place. I love what the college stands for, and I love the kind of students we attract.

To our friends and alumni, all I can ask is that they continue to show their love for the college and understand that St. John's is a strong place but also a fragile place. Please continue with your gifts and your volunteerism. Please know that you should place great faith in Santa Fe's incoming president, Walter Sterling, who has been the campus's longest serving dean, an alum, a true friend, and one of the hardest workers and most passionate Johnnies I have ever known. I know that he would agree with Nora and me when I share my parting thought:

A lonely crowd really does hunger for dialogue, and this college needs to be here, always, for exactly that reason.



“The major
outcome
of a
liberal arts
education
should be
humility.”

—MARK ROOSEVELT



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