

Inaugural Address
J. Walter Sterling, President
St. John's College, Santa Fe
February 27, 2026

Thank you, Warren, and thanks to all the friends and colleagues who have spoken. I am grateful for your goodwill and support, in our work together, today and each day. And thank you to the St. John's College Chorus — to be Johnnies is among other things to sing together.

Planning this full weekend of events has been a tremendous amount of work for too many to name. I am so grateful to all. Today, for this ceremony and celebration, I do want to thank especially my assistant Natasha Chin, Sara Luell, our Senior Director of Communications on the Annapolis campus, and Phil Kaniatobe and the whole team from Buildings and Grounds — and Chuck Tucker for the gallery exhibition celebrating 61 years now, in Santa Fe. They all, and many others I am not naming, have gone far more than the extra mile. Thank you.

I want to recognize three former presidents who are present today: John Agresto, Mike Peters, and Mark Roosevelt, all exemplary stewards of our college and this campus, who left it better and stronger after their season of leadership. Thank you for your presence today and for your good counsel to me over many years.

And welcome and thanks to all members of our college community and all our other guests from near and far. It is humbling and a thrill to have you all here.

And a special thanks and welcome to you Mayor Garcia and other local civic leaders and educational leaders. Mayor Garcia, please know you have our support in your new office and in your work advancing our city and community.

And I might also say, welcome *back* to many of you — as we view the reopening of this building as the time for a renewed invitation to our local community to join us on our campus — in our transformed coffee shop and bookstore — I'll assert it is the best bookstore with the best views in the country — and join us for our lectures, concerts, theater events, classics seminars, and other lifelong learning opportunities available here. Truly, welcome.

In my life, when it mattered most, I've been lifted up by the love and support of family and friends, and by extraordinary communities I've had the privilege of being part of for a season of life — where I have worked, studied, or practiced my faith. Some are here; many are not. I hope you all know how grateful I am.

I want to thank my father, tutor emeritus and alumnus of this college, who found at St. John's the calling that shaped his life, beginning in Annapolis as a freshman in 1959. He

is present today. You always wanted what was best for me and you opened for me the doors through which I eventually found everything I live by.

And I want to honor the memory of mother, Sondra Hiller Sterling, also a Johnnie, Class of 1964, the granddaughter of four eastern European Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side of New York City. It was the unlikely convergence of her and my father's paths at St. Johns in Annapolis to which I owe my existence. She died last October 2nd, on Yom Kippur. Her life was filled with struggle, but grace and love shone through her struggles.

And to Meghan, Will, and Luke — you three are the great blessing and joy of my life. Thank you for allowing the mission and work of this college to be such a large part of our family's life.

To stand here now, entrusted with the presidency of St. John's College, Santa Fe is a profound honor and deeply humbling.

Last speakers are often said to be standing between their audience and a glass of wine. That *may* be true today — but at St. John's, I am standing between you and good conversation. It is the love of logoi that unites us here. Let's get to those conversations. But first, I will bring my own offering to the banquet.

This occasion is just one part of a full weekend celebrating this college and community and the reopening and rededication of this beautiful building, and a celebration especially of our alumni and their accomplishments. Everything I have to say is meant to contribute to this celebration, a celebration of our strengths. I am going to speak to just two things, my convictions, first, that this education is needed now more than ever, and, second, that we are and should be ever more at home here in Santa Fe.

Many of you hear me say frequently this education is needed now more than ever. What do I mean?

Our students and alumni benefit from a program introduced in Annapolis in 1937 by Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan — as a great renewal of liberal (“freeing”) education, emerging from a broader national movement. Rooted in reading and discussion of classic texts across disciplines, with as much emphasis on mathematics and natural science as on the humanities, with faculty as co-learners and guides, not authorities — this fully integrated four-year program aims at the cultivation of intellect and imagination, the pursuit of truth, and the freedom of the mind. It emerged at a time of global upheaval, when the founders feared that unchecked specialization and pre-professionalization might erode not only such educational ideals but the foundations of democratic life itself. They rejected the false choice between the pursuit of truth, preparation for career, and preparation for citizenship. They believed this education *equipped* students for *all* the activities of modern life. A plaque in Weigle Hall quotes Barr who meant this not as metaphor: a college is a small republic, and so is a seminar.

This campus opened in 1964, at another moment of upheaval, less than a year after the assassination of President Kennedy. The leaders at that time affirmed explicitly that reasoned conversation across difference was, in a deep sense, the only alternative to violence.

Today, we live in another time of technological disruption and political division.

There is widespread concern about the effects of social media and digital saturation on young minds, on all minds — the consequences of what some have called “attention capitalism” — and now anxiety about the further colonization of our minds and agency by AI. There is also a growing allergy to hyper-polarization and the fraying of our civic fabric.

The simple yet profound practice at the heart of this education is a small group sitting around a table — real faces, real voices — engaged in sustained dialogue and shared inquiry across disagreement, with a tangible unhackable book on the table that rewards and deepens attention rather than fragmenting it. These practices cultivate what is called deep literacy and equip students for the hard pluralism our civic life requires. Today, this looks less like preservation of an antique education and more like an urgently needed remedy — an antidote to the greatest risks of our technological and political moment. Our college is indeed small, but these practices should not be rare. We do not need 1,000 St. John’s Colleges. But we do need many more institutions realigning their incentives to enable their students to do more of what our students practice constantly.

We are, of course, at a time of intense pressure for higher education — economic, demographic, political, technological. We face those challenges at St. John’s. They are generic. But our strengths are rare and exceptional, and they will carry us forward. Not easily. But because we are willing to make the practical and often hard decisions necessary to enable this community to flourish. Our aims are clear and needed. And our strengths continue to draw extraordinary philanthropic support — support that sustains our endowment, invests in our campus homes, lowers barriers for students drawn to this education, and launches student internships and career pathways. We will continue to reach out to and rely on friends, supporters, and political representatives who understand the increasing value and importance of this place and this education.

At the same time, we see signs of renewal well beyond our campuses. In phone-free school movements. In the ever-expanding classical learning movement. In the growing array of civic thought institutes at universities across the country. In renewed interest in the classics and books in general and the cultivation of deep literacy. In the increasingly voiced and urgent question: can democracy survive in a post-literate society? We hear it from leaders in technology who argue that as AI grows more powerful, the human capacities cultivated by liberal education become more, not less, important. And we hear it abroad, from our friends and partners, from Korea to China to the Netherlands, and on and on. In this country these may seem like cross- or counter-currents to the mainstream — that has long been perceived as increasingly unfriendly to these ideals — but these countercurrents are growing and converging. And they will continue to grow if we as

educators press ourselves to respond to the urgent needs of this moment — and to offer simply the education our students deserve. These movements extend the reach and responsibility of our college as St. John’s continues to be what it has been since 1937 — a national, now international, seed bank for deep educational renewal.

Let me turn now closer to home.

I have described my vision of St. John’s College as founded on the program, at home in Santa Fe, and reaching out to the world.

As President of the Santa Fe Campus, the office which I officially assume today, I am most anxious to support our being at home in Santa Fe.

We celebrate now more than six decades on this campus. From the beginning, we felt we had found the right home here — captured in a headline announcing the new campus, “The Feeling is Mutual,” linking the spirit of Santa Fe to that of St. John’s. In these sixty-plus years, we have benefited enormously from Santa Fe — from the beauty, cultural richness, and extraordinary community of people in this place — *and* we have hoped to engage ever more deeply with our neighbors and community.

Today, I want to stress our commitment to being good stewards and citizens of this place, worthy of the public trust. We now provide tuition-free master’s degrees for New Mexico’s K–12 teachers with financial need, full tuition scholarships for students from families under \$75,000 in annual income, reduced in-state tuition for New Mexico residents, Pell matching grants, funded professional development for New Mexico teachers, and additional scholarships to students from the region, through our Southwest Scholars program.

Through sustained commitments to access, ever expanding local partnerships, funded internship pathways for our students, and an ever-growing body of alumni living and working in this state — the most per capita of any state in the country — the life of this college is intertwined with the life of this city, state, and region.

Two recent gifts exemplify and strengthen our roots here.

First, this weekend we formally announce and launch the Buchanan Forum, named in honor of Scott Buchanan and his expansive vision, made possible by a generous \$2 million gift from our friends David and Christine Bernick. Supporting five years of programming, the Forum will expand the reach of the College’s founding vision — *worldly engagement grounded in liberal education* — through lectures, conferences, visiting faculty, institutional partnerships, and sustained conversation with leading thinkers. David and Christine, we are deeply grateful. This weekend’s three public lectures and panels, beginning with our conversation with Shilo Brooks this evening constitute the first convenings of the Buchanan Forum.

Second, I am honored to announce the creation of the Gray–Roosevelt Scholarship Fund for the Santa Fe campus. Catalyzed by a \$5 million anonymous challenge gift, now, with additional support from board leaders and other friends of this campus, grown to \$12 million and expected to reach \$15 million, this fund will provide critical scholarship support and financial stability in the coming years. Named by our Challenge Match donor in honor of alumnus and board member John Gray and President Emeritus Mark Roosevelt, this fund further strengthens our commitment to access and affordability here in Santa Fe and ensures that students drawn to this education need not be turned away by the barrier of cost. Mark, you continue to be a tireless champion of the College and this campus. The Challenge Match gift and the broader scholarship effort would not have been possible without your steadfast advocacy and leadership. I am deeply grateful.

Each of these gifts — and so many others — speak to the devotion of our friends and neighbors in Santa Fe and their confidence that this college and this campus have an outsized importance here and beyond.

We do face challenges at St. John’s. The seal you see before me, from 1937, proudly speaks of making free individuals by means of books and a balance. Our older seal, dating to 1793, reminds us that no way is impassable to courage. We as educators need *that* message today more than ever. We *should* aspire to have the courage of our convictions. And I commit to doing everything I can to sustain, support, and fight for the flourishing of this education, this college, this campus, and this extraordinary community of people who give it life.

Still, any presidency of a college is in the end a brief chapter. The conversation at the heart of this college will long endure.

Long after any of us leave this hall, students will gather around the seminar table. They will open these inexhaustible books. They will wrestle with the deepest questions and be challenged to answer them for themselves. They will struggle, and through the struggle they will flourish. They will acquire the difficult, ennobling freedom that genuine education makes possible. And they will find great joy in achieving — with friends, and in this community — independence of mind, seriousness of purpose, and a sense of belonging to a larger human adventure.

That is the quiet miracle, the quiet wonder, of this place.

May we preserve and strengthen it. May we remain worthy of it.

And now — let us return to the conversation. St. John’s Forever!

Thank you.